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MAGAZINE



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FANTASIES**

**A Sharon McCone
Investigation**

**by
Marcia Muller**

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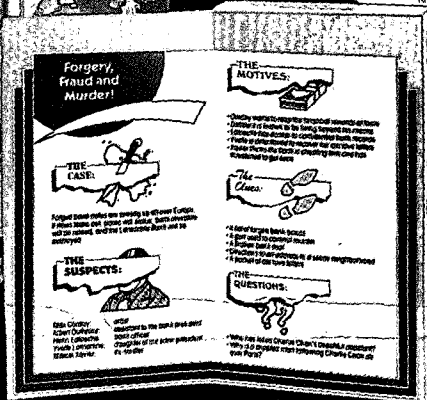
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 34, No. 4, April, 1989. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.00 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.50 in Canada. Annual subscription \$25.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$29.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1989 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 871 Janette Ave., Windsor, Ontario, N9C321. ISSN: 0002-5224.

Cover by Michael Tedesco

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In the February issue, we brought you the list of Shamus Award nominees and winners, presented at Bouchercon XIX in October. We didn't have the space in that issue for the Anthonys, a fairly new set of awards also presented there. The Anthonys—which are not limited to the private eye genre as the Shamuses are—are nominated and voted on by attendees at the convention. Mystery fans, therefore, get to participate in the process (the Edgar Awards, presented by the Mystery Writers of America, and the Shamuses, presented by the Private Eye Writers of America, are selected only by mystery and private eye writers).

The list follows, with winners in bold face type.

BEST NOVEL OF 1987:

***Skinwalkers* by Tony Hillerman (Harper & Row)**

A Trouble of Fools by Linda Barnes (St. Martin's)

Old Bones by Aaron Elkins (Mysterious Press)

Trojan Gold by Elizabeth Peters (Atheneum)

Marriage Is Murder by Nancy Pickard (Scribners)

BEST FIRST MYSTERY OF 1987:

***Caught Dead in Philadelphia* by Gillian Roberts (Scribners)**

Death on the Rocks by Michael Allegretto (Scribners)

The House of Blue Lights by Robert J. Bowman (St. Martin's)

(continued on page 4)

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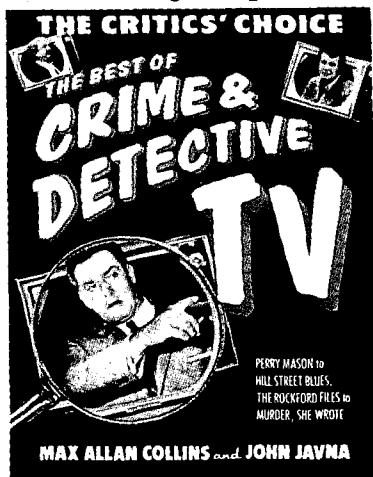
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(continued from page 2)

Murder at the War by Mary
Monica Pulver (St.
Martin's)

*An Infinite Number of
Monkeys* by Les Roberts
(St. Martin's)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF
1987:

The Monkey's Raincoat by
Robert Crais (Bantam)

The Cat Who Played Brahms
by Lilian Jackson Braun
(Jove)

Death on Demand by Carolyn
G. Hart (Bantam)

Bishop's Gambit Declined by
Conrad Haynes (Bantam)

Where Lawyers Fear to Tread
by Lia Matera (Bantam)

Bimbos of the Death Sun by
Sharyn McCrumb (TSR)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1987:

"*Breakfast Television*" by
Robert Barnard
(EQMM)

"Scrap" by Max Allan Collins
(*The Black Lizard*
Anthology)

"Soft Monkey" by Harlan
Ellison (*Mystery Scene*
Reader)

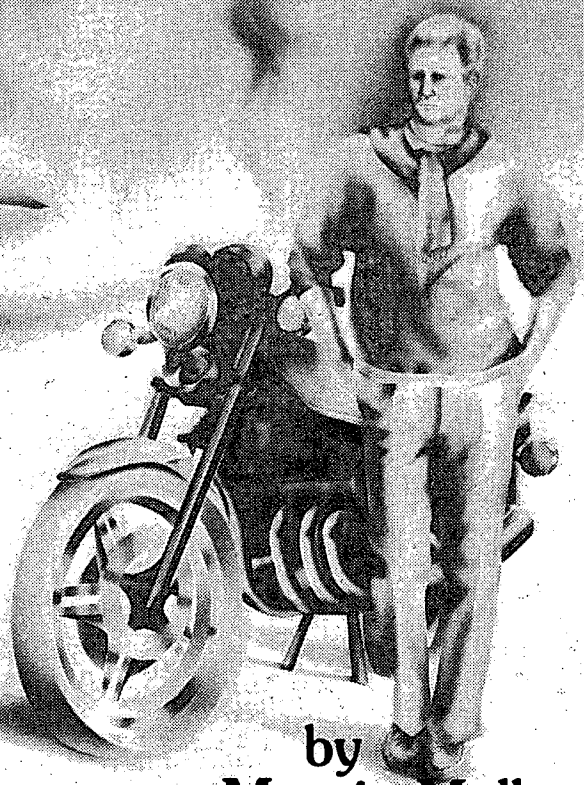
"Turn Away" by Ed Gorman
(*The Black Lizard*
Anthology)

"The Au Pair Girl" by Joyce
Harrington (*A Matter of*
Crime)

(continued on page 152)

FICTION

Deadly Fantasies



by
Marcia Muller

Illustration by Halina Malicka

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“Ms. McCone, I know what you’re thinking. But I’m not paranoid. One of them—my brother or my sister—is trying to kill me!”

“Please, call me Sharon.” I said it to give myself time to think. The young woman seated across my desk at All Souls Legal Cooperative certainly sounded paranoid. My boss, Hank Zahn, had warned me about that when he’d referred her for private investigative services.

“Let me go over what you’ve told me, to make sure I’ve got it straight,” I said. “Six months ago you were living here in the Mission district and working as a counselor for emotionally disturbed teenagers. Then your father died and left you his entire estate, something in the neighborhood of thirty million dollars.”

Laurie Newingham nodded and blew her nose. As soon as she’d come into my office she’d started sneezing. Allergies, she’d told me. To ease her watering eyes she’d popped out her contact lenses and stored them in their plastic case; in doing that she had spilled some of the liquid that the lenses soaked in over her fingers, then nonchalantly wiped them on her faded jeans. The gesture endeared her to me because I’m sloppy,

too. Frankly, I couldn’t imagine this freshly scrubbed young woman—she was about ten years younger than I, perhaps twenty-five—possessing a fortune. With her trim, athletic body, tanned, snub-nosed face, and carelessly styled blonde hair, she looked like a high school cheerleader. But Winfield Newingham had owned much of San Francisco’s choice real estate, and Laurie had been the developer’s youngest—and apparently favorite—child.

I went on, “Under the terms of the will, you were required to move back into the family home in St. Francis Wood. You’ve done so. The will also stipulated that your brother Dan and sister Janet can remain there as long as they wish. So you’ve been living with them, and they’ve both been acting hostile because you inherited everything.”

“Hostile? One of them wants to *kill* me! I keep having stomach cramps, throwing up—you know.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“I *hate* doctors! They’re always telling me there’s nothing wrong with me, when I know there *is*.”

“The police, then?”

“I like them a whole lot less than doctors. Besides, they wouldn’t believe me.” Now she

took out an inhaler and breathed deeply from it.

Asthma, as well as allergies, I thought. Wasn't asthma sometimes psychosomatic? Could the vomiting and other symptoms be similarly rooted?

"Either Dan or Janet is trying to poison me," Laurie said, "because if I die, the estate reverts to them."

"Laurie," I said, "why did your father leave everything to you?"

"The will said it was because I'd gone out on my own and done something I believed in. Dan and Janet have always lived off him; the only jobs they've ever been able to hold down have been ones Dad gave them."

"One more question: Why did you come to All Souls?" My employer is a legal services plan for people who can't afford the going rates.

Laurie looked surprised. "I've *always* come here, since I moved to the Mission and started working as a counselor five years ago. I may be able to afford a downtown law firm, but I don't trust them any more now than I did when I inherited the money. Besides, I talked it over with Dolph, and he said it would be better to stick with a known quantity."

"Dolph?"

"Dolph Edwards. I'm going to

marry him. He's director of the guidance center where I used to work—still work, as a volunteer."

"That's the Inner Mission Self-Help Center?"

She nodded. "Do you know them?"

"Yes." The center offered a wide range of social services to a mainly Hispanic clientele—including job placement, psychological counseling, and short term financial assistance. I'd heard that recently their programs had been drastically cut back due to lack of funding—as all too often happens in today's arid political climate.

"Then you know what my father meant about my having done something I believed in," Laurie said. "The center's a hopeless mess, of course; it's never been very well organized. But it's the kind of project I'd like to put my money to work for. After I marry Dolph I'll help him realize his dreams effectively—and in the right way."

I nodded and studied her for a moment. She stared back anxiously. Laurie was emotionally ragged, I thought, and needed someone to look out for her. Besides, I identified with her in a way. At her age I'd also been the cheerleader type, and I'd gone out on my own and done something I believed in, too.

"Okay," I said. "What I'll do

is talk with your brother and sister, feel the situation out. I'll say you've applied for a volunteer position here, counseling clients with emotional problems, and that you gave their names as character references."

Her eyes brightened and some of the lines of strain smoothed. She gave me Dan's office phone number and Janet's private line at the St. Francis Wood house. Preparing to leave, she clumsily dropped her purse on the floor. Then she located her contact case and popped a lens into her mouth to clean it; as she fitted it into her right eye, her foot nudged the bag, and the inhaler and a bottle of time-release vitamin capsules rolled across the floor. We went for them at the same time, and our heads grazed each other's.

She looked at me apologetically. One of her eyes was now gray, the other a brilliant blue from the tint of the contact. It was like a physical manifestation of her somewhat schizoid personality: down-to-earth wholesomeness warring with what I had begun to suspect was a dangerous paranoia.

Dan Newingham said, "Why the hell does Laurie want to do that? She doesn't have to work any more, even as a volunteer. She controls all

the family's assets."

We were seated in his office in the controller's department of Newingham Development, on the thirty-first floor of one of the company's financial district buildings. Dan was a big guy, with the same blond good looks as his sister, but they were spoiled by a petulant mouth and a body whose bloated appearance suggested an excess of good living.

"If she wants to work," he added, "there're plenty of positions she could fill right here. It's her company now, dammit, and she ought to take an interest in it."

"I gather her interests run more to the social services."

"More to the low life, you mean."

"In what respect?"

Dan got up and went to look out the window behind the desk. The view of the bay was blocked by an upthrusting jumble of steel and plate glass—the legacy that firms such as Newingham Development had left a once old fashioned and beautiful town.

After a moment Dan turned. "I don't want to offend you, Ms. . . . McCone, is it?"

I nodded.

"I'm not putting down your law firm, or what you're trying to do," he went on, "but when you work on your end of the

spectrum, you naturally have to associate with people who aren't quite . . . well, of our class. I wasn't aware of the kind of people Laurie was associating with during those years she didn't live at home, but now . . . her boyfriend, that Dolph, for instance. He's always around; I can't stand him. Anyway, my point is, Laurie should settle down now, come back to the real world, learn the business. Is that too much to ask in exchange for thirty million?"

"She doesn't seem to care about the money."

Dan laughed harshly. "Doesn't she? Then why did she move back into the house? She could have chucked the whole thing."

"I think she feels she can use the money to benefit people who really need it."

"Yes, and she'll blow it all. In a few years there won't be any Newingham Development. Oh, I know what was going through my father's mind when he made that will: Laurie's always been the strong one, the dedicated one. He thought that if he forced her to move back home, she'd eventually become involved in the business and there'd be real leadership here. Laurie can be very single-minded when she wants things to go a certain way, and that's what it takes to run a firm like this. But the sad

thing is, Dad just didn't realize how far gone she is in her bleeding heart sympathies."

"That aside, what do you think about her potential for counseling our disturbed clients?"

"If you really want to know, I think she'd be terrible. Laurie's a basket case. She has psychosomatic illnesses, paranoid fantasies. She needs counseling herself."

"Can you describe these fantasies?"

He hesitated, tapping his fingers on the window frame. "No, I don't think I care to. I shouldn't have brought them up."

"Actually, Mr. Newingham, I think I have an inkling of what they are. Laurie told her lawyer that someone's trying to poison her. She seemed obsessed with the idea, which is why we decided to check her references thoroughly."

"I suppose she also told her lawyer who the alleged poisoner is?"

"In a way. She said it was either you or your sister Janet."

"God, she's worse off than I realized. I suppose she claims one of us wants to kill her so he can inherit my father's estate. That's ridiculous—I don't need the damned money. I have a good job here, and I've invested profitably." Dan paused, then added, "I hope you can convince her to get into an intensive

therapy program before she tries to counsel any of your clients. Her fantasies are starting to sound dangerous."

Janet Newingham was the exact opposite of her sister: a tall brunette with a highly stylized way of moving and speaking. Her clothes were designer, her jewelry expensive, and her hair and nails told of frequent attention at the finest salons. We met at the St. Francis Wood house—a great pile of stone reminiscent of an Italian villa that sat on a double lot near the fountain that crowned the area's main boulevard. I had informed Laurie that I would be interviewing her sister, and she had agreed to absent herself from the house; I didn't want my presence to trigger an unpleasant scene between the two of them.

I needn't have worried, however. Janet Newingham was one of those cool, reserved women who may smolder under the surface but seldom display anger. She seated me in a formal parlor overlooking the strip of park that runs down the center of St. Francis Boulevard and served me coffee from a sterling silver pot. From all appearances, I might have been there to discuss the Junior League fashion show.

When I had gotten to the point of my visit, Janet leaned forward and extracted a cigarette from an ivory box on the coffee table. She took her time lighting it, then said, "Another volunteer position? It's bad enough she kept on working at that guidance center for nothing after they lost their federal funding last spring, but this . . . I'm surprised; I thought nothing would ever pry her away from her precious Dolph."

"Perhaps she feels it's not a good idea to stay on there, since they plan to be married."

"Did she tell you that? Laurie's always threatening to marry Dolph, but I doubt she ever will. She just keeps him around because he's her one claim to the exotic. He's one of these social reformers, you know. Totally devoted to his cause."

"And what is that?"

"Helping people. Sounds very sixties, doesn't it? That center is his *raison d'être*. He founded it, and he's going to keep it limping along no matter what. He plays the crusader role to the hilt, Dolph does: dresses in Salvation Army castoffs, drives a motorcycle. You know the type."

"That's very interesting," I said, "but it doesn't have much bearing on Laurie's ability to fill our volunteer position. What

do you think of her potential as a counselor?"

"Not a great deal. Oh, I know that's what she's been doing these past five years, but recently Laurie's been . . . a very disturbed young woman. But you know that. My brother told me of your visit to his office, and that you had already heard of her fantasy that one of us is trying to kill her."

"Well, yes. It's odd—"

"It's not just odd, it's downright dangerous. Dangerous for her to walk around in such a paranoid state, and dangerous for Dan and me. It's our reputations she's smearing."

"Because on the surface you both appear to have every reason to want her out of the way."

Janet's lips compressed—a mild reaction, I thought, to what I'd implied. "On the surface, I suppose that is how it looks," she said. "But as far as I'm concerned Laurie is welcome to our father's money. I had a good job in the public relations department in Newingham Development; I saved and invested my salary well. After my father died, I quit working there, and I'm about to open my own public relations firm."

"Did the timing of your quitting have anything to do with Laurie's inheriting the company?"

Janet picked up a porcelain

ashtray and carefully stubbed her cigarette out. "I'll be frank with you, Ms. McCone: it did. Newingham Development had suddenly become not a very good place to work; people were running scared—they always do when there's no clear managerial policy. Besides . . ."

"Besides?"

"Since I'm being frank, I may as well say it. I did not want to work for my spoiled little bitch of a sister who's always had things her own way. And if that makes me a potential murderer—"

She broke off as the front door opened. We both looked that way. A man wearing a shabby tweed coat and a shocking purple scarf and aviator sunglasses entered. His longish black hair was windblown, and his sharp features were ruddy from the cold. He pocketed a key and started for the stairway.

"Laurie's not here, Dolph," Janet said.

He turned. "Where is she?"

"Gone shopping."

"Laurie hates to shop."

"Well, that's where she is. You'd better come back in a couple of hours." Janet's tone did little to mask her dislike.

Nor did the twist of his mouth mask *his* dislike of his fiancée's sister. Without a word he turned and strode out the door.

I said, "Dolph Edwards?"

"Yes. You can see what I mean."

Actually, I hadn't seen enough of him, and I decided to take the opportunity to talk to him while it was presented. I thanked Janet Newingham for her time and hurried out.

Dolph's motorcycle was parked at the curb near the end of her front walk, and he was just revving it up when I reached him. At first his narrow lips pulled down in annoyance, but when I told him who I was, he smiled and shut the machine off. He remained astride it while we talked.

"Yes, I told Laurie it would be better to stick with All Souls," he said when I mentioned the context in which I'd first heard of him. "You've got good people there, and you're more likely to take Laurie's problem seriously than some downtown law firm."

"You think someone *is* trying to kill her, then?"

"I know what I see. The woman's sick a lot lately, and those two—" he motioned at the house "—hate her guts."

"You must see a great deal of what goes on here," I said. "I noticed you have a key."

"Laurie's my fiancée," he said with a puritanical stiffness that surprised me.

"So she said. When do you plan to be married?"

I couldn't make out his eyes

behind the dark aviator glasses, but the lines around them deepened. Perhaps Dolph suspected what Janet claimed: that Laurie didn't really intend to marry him. "Soon," he said curtly.

We talked for a few minutes more, but Dolph could add little to what I'd already observed about the Newingham family. Before he started his bike he said apologetically, "I wish I could help, but I'm not around them very much. Laurie and I prefer to spend our time at my apartment."

I didn't like Dan or Janet Newingham, but I also didn't believe either was trying to poison Laurie. Still, I followed up by explaining the situation to my former lover and now good friend Greg Marcus, lieutenant with the SFPD homicide detail. Greg ran a background check on Dan for me, and came up with nothing more damning than a number of unpaid parking tickets. Janet didn't even have those to her discredit. Out of curiosity, I asked him to check on Dolph Edwards, too. Dolph had a record of two arrests involving political protests in the late seventies—just what I would have expected.

At that point I reported my findings to Laurie and advised her to ask her brother and sis-

ter to move out of the house. If they wouldn't, I said, she should talk to Hank about invalidating that clause of her father's will. And in any case she should also get herself some psychological counseling. Her response was to storm out of my office. And that, I assumed, ended my involvement with Laurie Newingham's problems.

But it didn't. Two weeks later Greg called to tell me that Laurie had been taken ill during a family cocktail party and had died at the St. Francis Wood house, an apparent victim of poisoning.

I felt terrible, thinking of how lightly I had taken her fears, how easily I'd accepted her brother and sister's claims of innocence, how I'd let Laurie down when she'd needed and trusted me. So I waited until Greg had the autopsy results and then went to the office at the Hall of Justice.

"Arsenic," Greg said when I'd seated myself on his visitor's chair. "The murderer's perfect poison: widely available, no odor, little if any taste. It takes the body a long time to eliminate arsenic, and a person can be fed small amounts over a period of two or three weeks, even longer, before he or she succumbs. According to the medical examiner, that's what happened to Laurie."

"But why small amounts? Why not just one massive dose?"

"The murderer was probably stupid enough that he figured if she'd been sick for weeks we wouldn't check for poisons. But why he went on with it after she started talking about someone trying to kill her . . ."

"He? Dan's your primary suspect, then?"

"I was using 'he' generically. The sister looks good, too. They both had extremely strong motives, but we're not going to be able to charge either until we can find out how Laurie was getting the poison."

"You say extremely strong motives. Is there something besides the money?"

"Something connected to the money; each of them seems to need it more badly than they're willing to admit. The interim management of Newingham Development has given Dan his notice; there'll be a hefty severance payment, of course, but he's deeply in debt—gambling debts, to the kind of people who won't accept fifty-dollars-a-week installments. The sister had most of her savings tied up in one of those real estate investment partnerships; it went belly up, and Janet needs to raise additional cash to satisfy outstanding obligations to the other partners."

"I wish I'd known about that when I talked with them. I

might have prevented Laurie's death."

Greg held up a cautioning hand. "Don't blame yourself for something you couldn't know or foresee. That should be one of the cardinal rules of your profession."

"It's one of the rules, all right, but I seem to keep breaking it. Greg, what about Dolph Edwards?"

"He didn't stand to benefit by her death. Laurie hadn't made a will, so everything reverts to the brother and sister."

"No will? I'm surprised Hank didn't insist she make one."

"According to your boss, she had an appointment with him for the day after she died. She mentioned something about a change in her circumstances, so I guess she was planning to make the will in favor of her future husband. Another reason we don't suspect Edwards."

I sighed. "So what you've got is a circumstantial case against one of two people."

"Right. And without uncovering the means by which the poison got to her, we don't stand a chance of getting an indictment against either."

"Well . . . the obvious means is in her food."

"There's a cook who prepares all the meals. She, a live-in maid, and the family basically eat the same things. On the

night she died, Laurie, her brother and sister, and Dolph Edwards all had the same hors d'oeuvres with cocktails. The leftovers tested negative."

"And you checked what she drank, of course."

"It also tested negative."

"What about medications? Laurie probably took pills for her asthma. She had an inhaler—"

"We checked everything. Fortunately, I caught the call and remembered what you'd told me. I was more than thorough. Had the contents of the bedroom and bathroom inventoried, anything that could have contained poison was taken away for testing."

"What about this cocktail party? I know for a fact that neither Dan nor Janet liked Dolph. And according to Dolph, they both hated Laurie. He wasn't fond of them, either. It seems like an unlikely group for a convivial gathering."

"Apparently Laurie arranged the party. She said she had an announcement to make."

"What was it?"

"No one knows. She died before she could tell them."

Three days later Hank and I attended Laurie's funeral. It was in an old-fashioned churchyard in the little town of Tomales, near

the bay of the same name northwest of San Francisco. The Newinghams had a summer home on the bay, and Laurie had wanted to be buried there.

It was one of those winter afternoons when the sky is clear and hard, and the sun is as pale as if it were filtered through water. Hank and I stood a little apart from the crowd of mourners on the knoll, near a windbreak of eucalyptus that bordered the cemetery. The people who had traveled from the city to lay Laurie to rest were an oddly assorted group: dark-suited men and women who represented San Francisco's business community; others who bore the unmistakable stamp of high society; shabbily dressed Hispanics who must have been clients of the Inner Mission Self-Help Center. Dolph Edwards arrived on his motorcycle; his inappropriate attire—the shocking purple scarf seemed several shades too festive—annoyed me.

Dan and Janet Newingham arrived in the limousine that followed the hearse and walked behind the flower-covered casket to the graveside. Their pious propriety annoyed me, too. As the service went on, the wind rose. It rustled the leaves of the eucalyptus trees and brought with it dampness and the odor of the nearby sea. During the

final prayer, a strand of my hair escaped the knot I'd fastened it in and blew across my face. It clung damply there, and when I licked my lips to push it away, I tasted salt—whether from the sea air or tears, I couldn't tell.

As soon as the service was concluded, Janet and Dan went back to the limousine and were driven away. One of the Chicana women stopped to speak to Hank; she was a client, and he introduced us. When I looked around for Dolph, I found he had disappeared. By the time Hank finished chatting with his client, the only other person left at the graveside besides us and the cemetery workers was an old Hispanic lady who was placing a single rose on the casket.

Hank said, "I could use a drink." We started down the uneven stone walk, but I glanced back at the old woman, who was following us unsteadily.

"Wait," I said to Hank and went to take her arm as she stumbled.

The woman nodded her thanks and leaned on me, breathing heavily.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "Can we give you a ride back to the city?" My old MG was the only car left beyond the iron fence.

"Thank you, but no," she said. "My son brought me. He's wait-

ing down the street, there's a bar. You were a friend of Laurie?"

"Yes." But not as good a friend as I might have been, I reminded myself. "Did you know her through the center?"

"Yes. She talked with my grandson many times and made him stay in school when he wanted to quit. He loved her, we all did."

"She was a good woman. Tell me, did you see her fiancé leave?" I had wanted to give Dolph my condolences.

The woman looked puzzled.

"The man she planned to marry—Dolph Edwards."

"I thought he was her husband."

"No, although they planned to marry soon."

The old woman sighed. "They were always together. I thought they were already married. But nowadays who can tell? My son—Laurie helped his own son, but is he grateful? No. Instead of coming to her funeral, he sits in a bar. . . ."

I was silent on the drive back to the city—so silent that Hank, who is usually oblivious to my moods, asked me twice what was wrong. I'm afraid I snapped at him, something to the effect of funerals not being my favorite form of entertainment, and when I dropped him at All

Souls, I refused to have the drink he offered. Instead I went downtown to City Hall.

When I entered Greg Marcus's office at the Hall of Justice a couple of hours later, I said without preamble, "The Newingham case: you told me you inventoried the contents of Laurie's bedroom and bathroom and had anything that could have contained poison taken away for testing?"

"... Right."

"Can I see the inventory sheet?"

He picked up his phone and asked for the file to be brought in. While he waited, he asked me about the funeral. Over the years, Greg has adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward my occasional interference in his cases. I've never been sure whether it's because he doesn't want to disturb what he considers to be my shaky thought processes, or that he simply prefers to leave the hard work to me.

When the file came, he passed it to me. I studied the inventory sheet, uncertain exactly what I was looking for. But something was missing there. What? I flipped the pages, then wished I hadn't. A photo of Laurie looked up at me, brilliant blue eyes blank and lifeless. No more

cheerleader out to save the world—

Quickly I flipped back to the inventory sheet. The last item was "1 handbag, black leather, & contents." I looked over the list of things from the bathroom again and focused on the word "unopened."

"Greg," I said, "what was in Laurie's purse?"

He took the file from me and studied the list. "It should say here, but it doesn't. Sloppy work—new man on the squad."

"Can you find out?"

Without a word he picked up the phone receiver, dialed, and made the inquiry. When he hung up he read off the notes he'd made. "Wallet. Checkbook. Inhaler, sent to lab. Vitamin capsules, also sent to lab. Contact lens case. That's all."

"That's enough. The contact lens case is a two-chambered plastic receptacle holding about half an ounce of fluid for the lenses to soak in. There was a brand-new, unopened bottle of the fluid on the inventory of Laurie's bathroom."

"So?"

"I'm willing to bet the contents of that bottle will test negative for arsenic; the surface of it might or might not show someone's fingerprints, but not Laurie's. That's because the murderer put it there *after* she died, but *before* your people

arrived on the scene."

Greg merely waited.

"Have the lab test the liquid in that lens case for arsenic. I'm certain the results will be positive. The killer added arsenic to Laurie's soaking solution weeks ago, and then he removed that bottle and substituted the unopened one. We wondered why slow poisoning, rather than a massive dose; it was because the contact case holds so little fluid."

"Sharon, arsenic can't be ingested through the eyes—"

"Of course it can't! But Laurie had the habit, as lots of contact wearers do—you're not supposed to, of course; it can cause eye infections—of taking her lenses out of the case and putting them into her mouth to clean them before putting them on. She probably did it a lot because she had allergies and took the lenses off to rest her eyes. That's how he poisoned her, a little at a time over an extended period."

"Dan Newingham?"

"No. Dolph Edwards."

Greg waited, his expression neither doubting nor accepting.

"Dolph is a social reformer," I said. "He funded that Inner Mission Self-Help Center; it's his whole life. But its funding has been cancelled and it can't go on much longer. In Janet Newingham's words, Dolph is

intent on keeping it going 'no matter what.'"

"So? He was going to marry Laurie. She could have given him plenty of money—"

"Not for the center. She told me it was a 'hopeless mess.' When she married Dolph, she planned to help him, but in the 'right way.' Laurie has been described to me by both her brother and sister as quite single-minded and always getting what she wanted. Dolph must have realized that too, and knew her money would never go for his self-help center."

"All right, I'll take your word for that. But Edwards still didn't stand to benefit. They weren't married, she hadn't made a will—"

"They *were* married. I checked that out at City Hall a while ago. They were married last month, probably at Dolph's insistence when he realized the poisoning would soon have a fatal effect."

Greg was silent for a moment. I could tell by the calculating look in his eyes that he was taking my analysis seriously. "That's another thing we slipped up on—just like not listing the contents of her purse. What made you check?"

"I spoke with an old woman who was at the funeral. She thought they were married and made the comment that nowa-

days you can't tell. It got me thinking. . . . Anyway, it doesn't matter about the will because under California's community property laws, Dolph inherits automatically in the absence of one."

"It seems stupid of him to marry her so soon before she died. The husband automatically comes under suspicion—"

"But the poisoning started long *before* they were married. That automatically threw suspicion on the brother and sister."

"And Dolph had the opportunity."

"Plenty. He even tried to minimize it by lying to me: he said he and Laurie didn't spend much time at the St. Francis Wood house, but Dan described Dolph as being around all the time. And even if he wasn't he could just as easily have poisoned her lens solution at his own apartment. He told another unnecessary lie to you when he said he didn't know what the announcement Laurie was going to make at the family gathering was. It could only have been the announcement of their secret marriage. He may even have increased the dosage of poison, in the hope she'd succumb before she could reveal it."

"Why do you suppose they kept it secret?"

"I think Dolph wanted it that way. It would minimize the suspicion directed at him if he just let the fact of the marriage come out after either Dan or Janet had been charged with the murder. He probably intended to claim ignorance of the community property laws, say he'd assumed since there was no will he couldn't inherit. Why don't we ask him if I'm right?"

Greg's hand moved toward his phone. "Yes—why don't we?"

When Dolph Edwards confessed to Laurie's murder, it turned out that I'd been absolutely right. He also added an item of further interest: he hadn't been in love with Laurie

at all, had had a woman on the Peninsula whom he planned to marry as soon as he could without attracting suspicion.

It was too bad about Dolph; his kind of social crusader had so much ego tied up in their own individual projects that they lost sight of the larger objective. Had Laurie lived, she would have applied her money to any number of worthy causes, but now it would merely go to finance the lifestyles of her greedy brother and sister.

But it was Laurie I felt worst about. And it was a decidedly bittersweet satisfaction that I took in solving her murder, in fulfilling my final obligation to my client.

FICTION

Spitting into the Wind

by Dan A. Sproul



Illustration by Sal Migliore

20

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All horseplayers die broke. At least, that's what they say. It's a pretty general statement, like saying all great leaders got to have a big nose. Horseplayers come in different sizes, different mentalities, and different income levels. To say they all die broke is baloney. But here's one you can paste on your wall: most horseplayers live broke.

Naturally I am prepared to give you an example. Suppose you are a P.I. with a broom closet office in downtown Miami. In that office is a cot where you sleep at night, a desk where you sometimes do business in the daytime, two chairs, and a phone that rarely rings because it only works when you pay the phone bill. I speak from personal experience. The office/sleeping room is mine.

Standard Investigations, that's me, Joe Standard. I don't care about the phone much, since most of my work comes from owners, trainers, and others involved in the South Florida racing industry. I manage to see them on a regular basis because, on occasion, I have been known to place a bet.

But I stray. I was about to give you an example of why horseplayers live broke. Orson the Turk comes to mind. He's the reason I have to move out of my office. Orson is not a

Turk. The name Turk is a shortchanged version of turkey. Orson looks like a turkey: skinny neck, big Adam's apple, beaklike nose, and a shock of red hair that hangs down on his forehead with abandon. Orson comes to me a week back. He wants me to get the goods on his wife Bambi, an exotic dancer at the Midas Lounge. Bambi and Orson are estranged. She has filed for divorce, and Orson figures he can do better in the settlement if I can provide him with some shenanigans to produce in court.

I had been working the past two weeks mucking stalls on the backstretch to come up with the rent. "Okay," I tell Orson, "but a hundred up front for expenses." He quickly agrees, producing a "C" note which he thrusts into my outstretched hand.

In a single afternoon, I come up with enough on Bambi to get her two weeks in the electric chair. I hand the goods over to Orson, who wants to kiss me, but I defer to the three hundred he still owes me.

"I'm tapped out just now, Joe. This divorce—you know? Damn lawyer is suckin' me dry. And I just had to make the payroll yesterday. Gimme a week or so. You know I'm good for it."

I should tell you, the Turk's payroll is doled out to certain

exercise riders and backstretch personnel. They, in turn, give him information on unlisted workouts for maiden first starters and shippers. Turk, you see, is a horseplayer: a specialist who channels his efforts to those particular runners on which there is little or no public information.

This turn of events does not thrill me. I have on my person only two hundred and fifty bucks to pay six hundred in back rent. I reveal to Orson my extreme unhappiness over his suggested arrangement.

"I'll tell you what, Joe. One of my boys came through for me a couple days ago. I'll give you something worth more than the three hundred. Tomorrow in the fifth at Calder, there's a two-year-old maiden filly—I'm a Streaker. Get down all you can."

I'm a Streaker is a nice looking dark bay, the standard black tail and black mane—nothing special—except she's sixty-to-one on the board when they finally get the nervous, inexperienced youngsters into the gate. A little poem I read somewhere keeps running incessantly through my brain.

*"Bet a closer over un-
challenged speed.
Bet a claimer over a stakes
steed.*

*If you really want to be
silly,
Bet your whole roll on a
maiden filly."*

This nagging pinprick of doubt vanishes at the break. The Turk is right; she's good. Out she goes smoking on the front end, holding a five length lead into the stretch turn.

But Garland Girl is better.

I'm a Streaker shortens stride late and gets nipped at the wire by a short nose. So now, instead of just being out the three hundred Orson owes me, I have dumped my last two hundred and fifty. Facing eviction in a matter of days, I discover myself embracing the status of financial basketcase. Swine, that's short for Swinehart, my companion at the track to whom I have confided, is writhing in agony on the cement floor, having dropped his last twenty-four bucks on the filly.

So there you have it. My '65 Mustang convertible is running on empty when I swing behind the Winn-Dixie supermarket in the mall to gather some empty boxes to pack my stuff.

The prospect of moving my cot into Swine's efficiency apartment is appalling. Not because the apartment is cluttered with trash; not because it is smaller than a convenience store toilet; not because it smells

like the dirty clothes hamper on a slave ship; it's because of the racket: a stench in the ear that eternally blares forth from his elephant-ear-sized stereo speakers, a vile cacophony which has cracked the plaster and driven off all living creatures within a hundred yard radius, except every form of insect known to man—and some not known. They seem inexorably drawn to the caterwauling.

I still had a couple of days, but it didn't seem likely I could come up with the money. I set one of the boxes on the desk and started emptying the drawers. Swine folded the cot and took it out to the Mustang.

I lovingly detached my three by five foot blowup photograph of Seattle Slew blowing Cormorant into the shrubbery as he drew off to win the Preakness Stakes. At this point, Elmoe Ryan came in.

Elmoe is a trainer of modest talent with whom I have a "How you doin'?" acquaintance.

"How you doin', Elmoe?"

"You movin'?"

"Just straightening things up," I reassured him. "What brings you downtown?"

Elmoe plopped down in my client chair. "I got a real problem, Joe. It's life or death. If you can't help me, I don't know what I'm goin' to do."

I leaned Slew gently against

the wall. I sensed it in the stale office air. Here was a fee. Here was salvation from the din of Swine's domicile. Swine came in and locked on to the chair behind my desk. "Hold on, Swine," I told him. "Don't take no more stuff out." Elmoe gave me a puzzled look. "Gettin' new furniture," I explained. "But that's my favorite chair. It stays."

"Harold's missing," Elmoe disclosed. "He was there last night. This morning he was gone." Elmoe twisted his hands nervously. "You only got two days to find him. After Saturday, it won't matter."

"Wait a minute, Elmoe. Why won't it matter after Saturday? And who is Harold?"

"Apples is running Saturday in the Everglades' Stakes. It's the biggest race of his career. He don't have much of a chance without Harold."

"Apples is a horse, right?"

"Of course he's a horse. What the hell you think I'm doin', runnin' stock cars?"

"And Harold is the jockey?" I ventured.

Elmoe's stare suggested that I might have a one-armed monkey on top of my head engaged in a lewd act. "A jockey!" he sputtered out at me. "Hell no, he ain't no jockey, you damn fool. I could replace a jockey. Harold's a duck."

"I see," I said. This was a lie.

It took some time to elicit the details. Apples was a three-year-old colt named No Groceries, nicknamed Apples due to his fondness for same. Harold was a duck, species unknown, but brownish in color, with some white on his neck. The duck, it seems, was a companion to No Groceries. He roosted on the horse's back at night, shared grain with him, and generally kept him content in the stall. Now that Harold is gone, Apples is despondent, won't eat, and works without enthusiasm, according to Elmoe.

"Apples is the best horse I ever had," he went on to explain, in obvious distress. "But if I can't cheer him up, he's not goin' to give me his best on Saturday. And he's goin' to need his best."

"Why don't you just get him another duck?" I suggested.

"What you think, he's stupid? You think he wouldn't know the difference? . . . Besides, I already tried six different ducks and a goose."

"Look, Elmoe, I don't normally take missing duck cases . . . but, ah . . . tell you what. Two days ain't much time. I'd have to work night and day—give up my caseload. It'll cost."

"How much?"

"Six hundred."

"For a duck?"

I shrugged.

"I ain't got six hundred bucks," Elmoe was quick to point out. "Tell you what, though. I'll give you fifty bucks up front and buy you a hundred dollar win ticket on Apples. That way you got some incentive to get the job done."

This deal was a variation on the theme of Orson the Turkey. Only a dummy gets burnt twice on the same scam. However, since my alternatives were nonexistent . . .

"What'll he be on the morning line?" I asked.

"Eight, maybe ten to one." Elmoe removed his ballcap and ran a hand through his graying hair. "'Course, without Harold, he ought to be about a hundred to one. I figure he only has two horses to beat: Arnie Ritter's horse, Otter Oil, and that shipper from Chicago. He looks like he might have some class. I forget his name now."

My detective mind snapped into action. "How about Arnie Ritter, did he know about Harold?"

Elmoe sat up straight in the chair. "Hell yes, he knew — everybody nearabouts to my barn knew about Harold. I bet that sorry bastard stole my duck." Elmoe jumped from his chair. "I'm gonna break his teeth."

"Hold on, Elmoe. It's only a thought. Don't jump to any con-

clusions. Let me look into it—see what I can find out. You need any stable help?”

“I always need help,” said Elmoe.

“Good. Hire me on as a groom for the next couple of days — standard rate. It’ll give me a chance to look into things in the backstretch.”

Elmoe agreed, gave me the fifty, and told me to be at his barn at five the next morning. At least now there was hope. I sent Swine out to bring the cot back in while I rehung my masterpiece.

“It’s gone,” Swine reported.

I rushed out into the street. The Mustang squatted at the curb with the top down. “It was stickin’ up out of the back seat,” Swine whined.

Some depraved, low-life dungball had stole my cot—a glaring shortfall of life in the big city, just Fate’s way of thumbing its nose at me. I went over to the truckstop on U.S. 27 and spent some of Elmoe’s fifty on a tank of gas. I took a shower and shaved. I felt better, but didn’t get much sleep on the office floor. At five A.M. the next morning, I arrived at Elmoe’s barn on the Calder backstretch, bathed, clean-shaven, ready to pitch manure and inquire into the whereabouts of Harold the duck.

I wasn’t sure just which barn belonged to Elmoe. But unlike

most all the other trainers, who used pickup trucks, Elmoe had a van. Didn’t take much detective work to find it. It was beige with *Ryan Public Stables* lettered in blue on each side.

Someone surprised me from behind. “You Joe Standard?”

The Calder backstretch is well maintained, with tarmac roads, its own training track, and spotless, modern barns. Calder epitomizes the ultimate in modern racing plants; conversely, this fellow was a composite of every low end, backstretch manure handler in the business.

Shoulder-length hair, a couple of acne booboes spotted strategically on forehead, chin, and cheek, his beard and mustache sprouting with no more vigor than that of an adolescent girl of Mediterranean decent. His teeth were green.

“You talking to me?”

“Yeah, are you Joe Standard?”

Shifty eyes I can handle. But green teeth make me suspicious. “You takin’ a census or what?”

“Elmoe told me to meet you. He’s goin’ to be late.” Scum Teeth held out a hand. “The name’s Weed.”

I took the grimy appendage with reluctance. “Weed?”

“Eh . . . my real name’s Milton . . . Milton May. But everybody . . .”

"Never mind," I cut him off. "I can guess." It seemed strange that Elmoe would confide in Weed. "Elmoe told you who I was?"

"I was waitin' in the truck when he stopped to see you yesterday. I'm supposed to tell you where to go."

The kid would have made a peachy straight man. Weed didn't look to have the sand, so I chanced it. "Okay, where should I go?"

"He told me to tell you to forget about muckin' any stalls until you find Harold. He said you should talk to Arnie Ritter." Weed pointed down the road. "He's in that barn at the end, just before the road turns."

"What can you tell me about Harold?"

"He's a duck."

"I need something a little more specific. Where did he come from? How long has he been around? Did he have any peculiar habits? Girlfriends? Strike that. Ducks like water—what did he do about that?"

"He was here when I went to work for Mr. Ryan a couple months ago. He used to get in the water buckets and wash himself all the time, a real pest. Never seen him stray off too far, though."

I left Weed to his chores and headed down the road to Ar-

nie's barn. The first fingers of dawn began to scratch away the darkness. Up and down the shedrow, stall-bound horses snorted impatiently to begin the day.

Arnie Ritter was no stranger. Years past, I did a little job for him, running down some exercise saddles that one of his crumb-bum stablehands copped for severance pay. Arnie was a big guy, maybe two hundred and twenty pounds. He sported an ugly half-moon scar across his cheek, the imprint from the working end of an aluminum racing shoe attached to a thousand pound gelding by the name of Nasty Neville. His muscular arms were covered with puffy bumps from years of exposure to horse teeth. He came out of the barn to meet me when I turned off the road. As brutal as he looked, Arnie always seemed like a decent sort.

"How you doin', Arnie?" I greeted him.

When you think about it, asking somebody if they swiped somebody's duck is a bit difficult to work into a conversation. He saved me the trouble.

"I don't know nothin' about Elmoe's duck," he told me up front. "Where do you get off tellin' him I took his duck?"

"Ah . . ."

"I ain't got enough to keep me busy? I got to go sneakin' around

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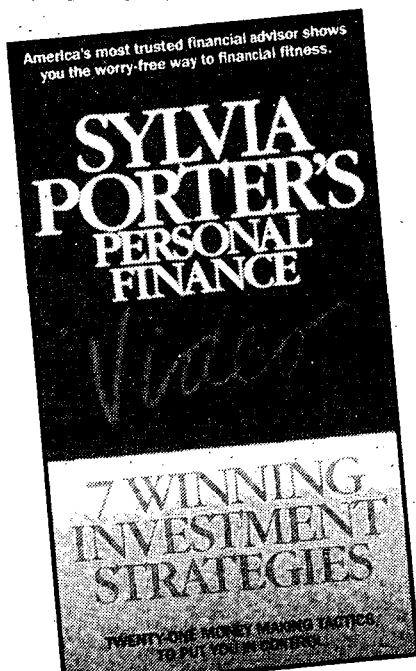
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at night stealin' ducks?"

"Easy Arnie. Didn't you ever hear the quote from Shakespeare: '...methinks he doth protest too much'?"

"I didn't take the damn duck. Methinks you can quote *me* on that. His colt ain't no threat to me. My horse already beat him twice. Elmoe's going to need more than a duck to beat Otter Oil in the Everglades—he's going to need a better horse. Icebarger is the only horse I'm worried about—you know, that Chicago shipper. I don't know how good he is. I hope somebody stole *his* duck."

"I gather that Elmoe has been here already?"

"He was here last night, the old fool. I thought somebody burnt down his barn the way he was hoppin' around." Arnie waved his bumpy arm toward his string of stalls. "You're welcome to look around if you want, Joe. I got nothin' to hide."

I declined. Arnie just didn't strike me as the ducknapping type. If somebody swiped the duck, my gut reaction was that I could rule out all those with horse bites on their arms. People with that affliction just aren't sneaky enough. It would take a sleaze of the first magnitude to steal a duck. My thoughts turned back to Weed. Weed lacked motive, unless driven by hunger. But if from hun-

ger, why wait two months? Why not pounce with the first stomach rumblings? Anyway, preparing roast duck on the backstretch without drawing hordes of onlookers would be Houdinian in scope. Harold could have just wandered off. But what a nasty coincidence, toddling off right before Apples' big chance.

I got maybe fifty yards down the road before I heard the puffing and grumbling from behind. I turned to see Arnie come thudding down the road after me.

"Joe! Wait a minute!" he called out.

I waited. He pulled up puffing and sweat-drenched. The sun had just cleared the horizon; the temperature was already climbing midway through the seventies.

"You're my witness," he informed me. It took him several seconds to gain the wind for his next utterance. "For when I have Elmoe arrested... after I... beat him to death.... One of the boys is calling track security."

"What the hell you talkin' about, Arnie?"

"That old bastard tried to kill my horse to get even for the duck. And I didn't even steal the damn duck. I'll give you a hundred bucks if you give me the duck when you find it. So

I can wring its neck."

"Calm down. Tell me what happened."

"I got a five-year-old stallion—Glory Shooter. Elmoe got him out and tied him off in front of Otter Oil's stall. But he broke loose sometime in the night. The boys found him clear over by the training track, draggin' a lead rope."

"I don't follow? What good would that do Elmoe?"

I got another lewd-monkey look. "They're stallions. They tore hell out of each other through the stall opening. Glory's legs are tore to hell. He's got bites on his neck. Otter's legs are all cut up from hittin' the top of the stall door. It's a miracle one of them ain't dead. If Glory hadn't broke loose and run off, it could have been a hell of a lot worse."

"Did anybody see Elmoe do it?" I moved back a step, fearful for an instant that Arnie might attempt to throttle me on the spot.

"I thought you was supposed to be a Goddamn detective!" he shouted in my face. "Who the hell else is gonna do something like that?"

"I think you're jumping the gun, Arnie," I cautioned him. "You start throwing accusations around without proof, punching people out, they'll put you away. Besides, I don't think

Elmoe did it. You two have been friends for twenty years. Do you really think he'd pull something like that?"

"If not Elmoe, who then?"

"I got an idea. But I have to check a few things out first. Ah . . . it'll cost."

"How much?"

"Six hundred."

"You're out of your tree," said Arnie. "How about this. I'll give you two hundred—but you got to have proof so I can prosecute."

"What's the line on Otter Oil?" I asked.

"Don't know off hand, five to two, maybe two to one."

"Is he going to start?"

"Not sure. The cuts look superficial. I'll have to have him x-rayed—but if he's sound, he goes."

"Put two hundred on his nose for me. I'll give you the culprit before noon tomorrow."

I went back to Elmoe's barn and questioned him concerning the duck. He told me something was wrong with Harold's wing. He couldn't fly—a fact not disclosed earlier. He had waddled in about eight months back. Apples' devotion to the duck was common knowledge. That Apples would react so profoundly to Harold's disappearance was not that widely known. Apples had displayed a similar despondency a month earlier

during a short absence on Harold's part. Elmoe wasn't sure who all he had told about the incident.

It didn't take much deductive reasoning to figure where I should look next. Of the three leading contenders in the Everglades' Stakes, an attempt had been made to incapacitate two of those contenders. Sixty percent of the fifty thousand dollar purse of the Everglades seemed like plenty of motive to promote a conspiracy. Icebarge, the shipper from Chicago, was stabled off track at a training center up in West Palm Beach.

I stopped at the Surfer Bar and Grill and picked up Swine. I figured he could shuffle around and try to scare up the duck while I talked to Icebarge's connections. Swine worked nights as a security guard for minimum wage. I passed him a few bucks from time to time to help me out.

Just past Pompano Beach, heading north on I-95, Swine turned the radio on in the Mustang. I reached over and shut it off. "Quit screwin' around with that," I told him.

"I need my music, Joe," he advised me, tapping both hands on my dash like it was a bongo drum.

"If you don't quit that, I'm gonna toss you in the canal. What happened to your ear-phone radio, anyway?"

"I hocked it to bet that filly," Swine divulged, twitching about. Swine, I suspected, had a thyroid the size of a cantaloupe. He was eternally hyper, with eyes like a mackerel. "What am I supposed to do, anyway?" he asked, tapping both feet on the floor mat.

"I don't know. Look for anything suspicious. Particularly any loose ducks running around. Talk to the help. Maybe you can pick up a tip for Saturday."

"Yeah—good idea. I get paid tonight."

With a healthy brush of a mustache, bronze-toned skin, shiny white teeth, Elvis sideburns, and perched on a sorrel mare, Al Figueroa could have played the lead in a spaghetti Western. Holding a stopwatch within biting distance of his nose, he watched a near-black colt tear around the training track.

"Excuse me. Mr. Figueroa?"

He allowed the runner to hit the finish before answering, jamming his thumb on the watch with a theatrical jerk. Executed for my benefit, no doubt. I tried to look duly impressed. "Are you Figueroa?"

"Yes, my friend. How can I help you?"

"Not just sure," I stammered. "I'm a private detective out of Miami—Joe Standard—Standard Investigations." I

showed him my license. His reaction was to stick a hand in the air like a flamenco dancer and turn the mare in a tight circle. There was no way to top that. He was probably a high-grade, nearsighted nut case. I stuck my wallet back in my hip pocket.

"Well, come, come, man — what's on your mind? I don't have all day. There are things to do—places to go."

"You're the trainer of Ice-charge, one of the favorites in the Everglades' Stakes?" Figueroa bobbed his head up and down, flashed his fangs, and puffed out his cheek with his tongue—then the other cheek. I took that to mean he was Ice-charge's trainer, but having plugged in to this one ten world, he was only operating on about sixty volts. I forged ahead anyway. "Somebody has made an attempt to . . . how can I say it. Somebody has tried to hamper the chances of two of your competitors in that race. I just wondered if it was you."

"I just came from Sportsman's Park," he responded. "I don't know anybody here. But I have a lot of money. Are you trying to suck up to me?"

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Figueroa."

He executed another turn on the mare. "I have a lot of friends in Illinois," I heard him say as I headed back for the Mustang

There is an adage in the racing world that says, "Good horses make good trainers." It goes a long way to explain how an idiot of Figueroa's ilk can achieve recognition as an expert in the game. If Figueroa had a hand in the goings on, he had to be working through someone else. Whoever took the duck and set the stallions at one another had to be familiar with the Calder backstretch community. If you stay in this business long enough, you get kind of a sense about things. Normally, it's impossible to fix a race unless you have most of the jockeys in your pocket. Somebody was trying to fix the Everglades' Stakes, but subtly. Not that difficult really—not in this case. He wouldn't have to fix every horse in the race. He'd only have to lessen the chances of two of the three main contenders. And not by much—just the length of a nostril would suffice—just steal a little bit of sharpness from two of the three. I could name at least ten high rollers off the top of my head with the clout, inclination, and means—but which? Swine gave me the answer. And it turned out to be the least high of rollers.

While we were heading back, just past Lake Worth, it started to rain. I stopped to put up the top. Swine, who had acquired a tip from an exercise rider, was

slaverling over the prospects of a maiden two-year-old colt named Sierra Sun, starting for the first time the next day—Saturday. I clamped the top down, and we took off once more. "I bet you didn't even look for the duck."

"I didn't see no duck. I'm tellin' you, this colt is a lock—and he's gonna pay telephone numbers. He went in forty-seven—and you know how slow them training tracks are. The guy gave me Icebarge, too—said he's been leaving vapor trails in the morning."

"Just because a two-year-old can kick some dust up for a half mile don't mean he can hold on for three quarters."

"Yeah, but this guy is reliable. He's the same one that exercises I'm a Streaker—she only lost by a short nose. He says to bet her next time. 'Course, she won't pay nothin' now."

It all fell into place. Icebarge was a shipper. Shippers don't normally do well over the Calder strip the first time out—they need at least a race or two—and fans at Calder are unwilling to plunge on the uncertainties of unknown class and performance over the one-of-a-kind, tiring Tartan strip. Icebarge would carry higher odds than Otter Oil, possibly even higher than No Groceries. Who would be privy to the horse's real ability?

The exercise rider would—the very same exercise rider Orson the Turk had on his payroll.

And who was better plugged in to the Calder backstretch than Orson the Turkey? He would be remiss in his business without at least ten or fifteen Calder grooms at his trough. There was never any doubt in my mind that Weed snatched the duck. The question was who put him up to it? Having worked for Elmoe two months, Weed had first-hand knowledge of No Groceries' response to the absence of Harold. Not many others would remember or care about such a thing unless they were selling information. And that Weed was capable of stealing a duck, there was little doubt. He had no qualms about swiping my cot. Who else? It was only in the street a few minutes. Elmoe must have carried it off in the back of the van without a backward glance. Weed's ripe body was probably reposing on it at this very moment.

Because of the divorce action, Orson had to be a bit in the hole. And, of course, he had to take a bath on I'm a Streaker. What better way to extract himself than to arrange for some insurance on a big score—betting his whole bankroll on one plunge. Clever—but he made one nose-cartilage-en-

dangerous mistake. Three hundred of that bankroll was mine. Orson the Turkey didn't know it yet, but Thanksgiving was coming early this year.

I dropped Swine off and pondered the situation. Working Orson's divorce case may not have been in vain. For instance, I knew that Orson had an apartment in North Miami Beach. Bambi had possession of the house in Miami Lakes until it could be sold and the proceeds distributed in the property settlement. But Bambi was living with a mob button man down in Kendall. The house was vacant, and Orson knew it. I told him so myself. Weed couldn't stash the duck on the backstretch. He must have delivered it over to Orson. Orson could have done one of three things: he could have eighty-sixed the duck—in which case I was spinning my wheels; he could have it with him in his apartment on the beach—not bloody likely; or, he could have stashed Harold at his old house.

Harold's appearance on the backstretch the day after the race would help squelch the whiff of conspiracy. It was the smart thing to do. I wheeled the Mustang onto the Palmetto Expressway and headed for Red Road. It would take me down into the Opa-Locka/Miami Lakes area. It's a long hike from Miami

Lakes to North Miami Beach. A bit of luck was called for. Elmoe's fifty was nearly history, and the gas gauge was shaking hands with empty again.

Bambi's place was a brick ranch style on a small lot, no pool but in a nice area, maybe two hundred grand on the open market. The garage door was one of those swing-up types. It was unlocked, so I swung it up.

Harold was pretty fat as ducks go. He didn't seem particularly happy to be rescued. A bale of timothy hay lay scattered about for nesting. Ripped asunder on the cement floor was a devastated fifty pound bag of horse feed along with a bucket of water and prodigious piles of duck doodoo. He clamped down on my thumb industriously when I attempted to put him in the back seat.

Harold staked out the space under my desk. It was a hectic night. The next morning on my way in to Elmoe's barn, I picked up Donny Cox, the assistant security chief. I showed him Harold, and told him what it was all about.

I had a hard time holding on to Harold as we neared Elmoe's barn. I think he knew he was home.

Elmoe and Arnie were doing a little dance in front of the tack box when we arrived. Arnie

moved his bulk in a tight circle, arms outstretched, trying to get a purchase on Elmoe's neck. Elmoe, slender and lithe, back-pedaled too quickly for him, managing a kick to Arnie's kneecap when he got too close. Weed watched from a safe distance.

"Get away from me you lousy fowl thief! Get away—or the next one goes between your legs," Elmoe advised.

Arnie hopped around on one leg holding his knee. "Wait till I get my hands on you—you little snake."

Elmoe broke off his attack and rushed to meet me when he saw the duck. "Harold!" he shouted, with arms outstretched.

Weed took off running down the shedrow, Donny Cox hot on his heels. Arnie limped around, testing his knee. He pointed at Elmoe. "I want him arrested," he yelled at Cox as he flew past in pursuit of Weed.

It took five minutes to explain it all to Arnie. It took another two minutes to restrain him when Donny Cox returned to the barn with Weed. When confronted by Arnie's angry, shoe scarred face, Weed squealed like a pig—laying the whole scam on Orson. While Elmoe was down in Apples' stall cooing to his duck, I located my cot in an empty stall, all set up behind

a stack of hay. Before leaving, I tactfully reminded Elmoe that I would be down to collect the cot and my hundred dollar ticket after the race. And reminded Arnie that if Otter Oil should prevail, I would be down to pick up my two hundred dollar ticket. There was but one loose end to tie up.

I met Swine in the grandstand at our usual seats just before the one o'clock post. The first thing he did was thrust a hundred dollar bill into my hand.

"What's this for?"

"Sierra Sun," said Swine.

"What? You want me to make the bet for you?"

"No, I want you to hold the money. So I don't blow it. Sierra Sun is goin' in the tenth race. I don't want to lose my bankroll and not have nothin' to bet on him. Don't give it to me until the tenth race—no matter what I do or say. You promise?"

I stuck the bill in my shirt pocket. "Sure. No problem."

My deal with Donny Cox was simple. He wouldn't grab Orson until after the Everglades—the ninth race. Orson maintained a reserved box in the clubhouse. I figured to wait until about the sixth race, then go over and pay him a visit.

By the fourth race, Swine had become a problem.

"Just twenty bucks—if I win, I'll give it back."

"No. You don't want me to break my promise, do you?"

"All right, ten bucks."

"Forget it."

Swine ground his teeth. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as they loaded the gate for the fourth race. "Please, Joe, just two bucks to keep it interesting." I shook my head. "You're no friend of mine," Swine declared. Several seconds of blessed silence ensued as the last horse went into the gate. "GIVE ME MY MONEY, YOU SWINE!"

He didn't stop. And it got worse as the entries for the fifth race paraded to the post. "I'll report you to security. I'll tell them you stole my money." He stood out in the aisle. "THIEF, THIEF!" he shouted.

"Sit down and shut up or I'll knock you out," I told him.

"All right, all right . . . If you don't give me twenty bucks, I'll expose myself. Ha . . . how do you like that?"

"Go ahead."

By the time they brought the horses out for the sixth race, I couldn't take no more.

"I'll call your girlfriend, Madeline whats-her-name in Hialeah, and tell her you're gay," he threatened.

"You watch the seats, I'll be back."

"Oh, no you don't. Where my money goes, I go."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Swine, old buddy. You move one inch out of that seat, and you won't get this money until tomorrow."

"I'll get you for this, Joe."

I went into the clubhouse, paid one of my last three dollars to get in, and took the escalator to the third level. Orson's box was midway up on the second level. A simple strategy really: if he was looking out at the track, I could approach unnoticed down the aisle from behind.

It worked.

"Joe! What are you doing here?"

I slid into the seat next to him. "Give me my three hundred, Turkey."

"I . . . ah . . . I don't have it. I told you in a week or so. It's only been half a week. I need a couple more days."

I grabbed his bony wrist and applied some pressure. "Don't jerk me around, Orson. Just hand over the three hundred."

"Honest, Joe, I ain't got it."

I reached over and pulled his wallet from his suit coat, flipping it open with one hand. Empty. I dropped the wallet on the floor and did a pat search of his shirt and suit coat pockets. From behind the hanky in his upper coat pocket, I pulled

a wad of hundred dollar tickets. I let go of his wrist.

"Told you I didn't have it," said Orson.

The tickets were all hundred dollar win tickets; they were advanced wagers—all on Ice-charge, the number five horse in the ninth race. I held the stack under his nose. "What do you call this—Duck Weed?"

It got a reaction. His bulbous Adam's apple slid up and down like a berserk elevator. "What the hell is Duck Weed?" he said, but clearly he understood the implications.

"Duck Weed is a small plant that floats around on top of the water. Just like you're gonna be doin' if you try to stiff me again." I peeled off three of the tickets, stuck them in my shirt pocket with Swine's hundred dollar bill, and handed back the remainder of the bundle.

I vacated the seat and started up the aisle. "Happy trails, Turkey."

When I got up to the seller's windows, I pulled out the tickets for another look. I never even thought of it. This is the computer age. Hell, they have advanced wagering. There was no reason to suffer with Swine until the tenth race.

I made a beeline for a window. "You got a program?" I asked the mutuels clerk. He slid one over to me. Sierra Sun

was the number two horse in the tenth race. "I want to bet the tenth race—a hundred bucks to win—number two."

Swine was lying slumped over an armrest on his seat. "All right, now what?" I asked.

"Heart attack . . . pain—came on sudden like," he reported, giving me a squint-eyed look. "No use waiting now—bet the hundred on Middlin Muse—number seven. Send the money to my mother in Lawrence, Kansas. I'll get you the address later."

"Sorry, I already bet your hundred."

He jumped up straight in his seat. "You fiend . . . you promised . . . you—"

I handed him the ticket on Sierra Sun.

He studied the ticket for several seconds. "Oh, this stinks . . . this is rotten—I changed my mind—I wasn't even going to bet him. What if he runs second like I'm a Streaker? Why didn't you go fifty win-fifty place? What about the perfectas?"

On and on he went. I got up and took a seat next to a fat Cuban woman across the aisle. Through the next two races, Swine engaged himself in conversation on the subject of friendship, raising his voice for particularly offensive tidbits like " . . . kick you when you're

down . . . can't trust your best friend, who can you trust?"

By the time the ninth race drew near, I was sitting five aisles away. I had my six hundred in rent, and well invested at that. With a hundred on No Groceries at six to one, two hundred on Otter Oil at five to two, and three hundred on Icebarge at five to one, all logical winners were covered. If the odds held, I would pick up either seven hundred on No Groceries or seven hundred on Otter Oil, but if Icebarge should happen to prevail, as I suspected he would, I could pocket eighteen hundred.

I tensed up a little bit as the assistant starters wrestled the last entry for the Everglades into the gate. It was a short field. Only seven would go. This was it. I voiced a silent prayer to my dead brother Louie to let Figuroa the fruitcake win one. But failing that at least . . .

"THEY'RE OFF!"

The jock aboard Icebarge got a quick jump on the pack out of the gate on the outside. Otter Oil, in the two post, broke to the front, skimming the rail as the pack scrambled for position into the clubhouse turn. No Groceries drew out from the middle to join the two leaders. Into the first turn they went, Otter Oil holding a head advantage over No Groceries, who was running

eyeball to eyeball with Icebarge, sending him wide as he bore out.

Straightening into the backstretch, Otter Oil drew off a half. Icebarge came on to capture second, a half length over No Groceries. The three leaders left the other four in the pack strung out behind, choking dust more than four lengths back. It looked to be a three-horse race. I kept my shining eyes fastened on Icebarge.

Otter Oil opened up a full length, heading into the far turn; No Groceries was finished. A victim of the blistering pace, he trailed Icebarge by more than three lengths. The rest of the pack were beginning to nibble on him.

At the quarter pole, Otter Oil began to tire. The jock on Icebarge was smelling blood. He rolled his knuckles on the rangy chestnut and showed him the whip. No Groceries was stepping on his tongue, passed by the pack, which trailed the two leaders by a rapidly dwindling three lengths.

At the top of the stretch, Otter Oil was giving ground as Icebarge drew even inside, along the rail. But dead game, Otter Oil fought back. Icebarge edged out a head in front, then a neck, but slowly.

Otter Oil hung tough a half length back at the sixteenth

pole. Icebarge could not maintain; he began to falter. Otter Oil came on again.

Thundering down the middle of the track came a whopping seventeen-hand roan—a forty to one shot named Willerman. Wide and next to last at the top of the stretch, he came like a Japanese jet train. It brought me to my feet. "Come on, you guys! Either one—I ain't greedy."

With seventy yards to go, Icebarge tossed in the towel. "Figuroa, you fruitcake!" Willerman hooked a totally exhausted Otter Oil in deep stretch. Otter Oil fought back determinedly, unable to dismiss the challenge. On guts alone he matched speed with the flying Willerman. "Bless you, Arnie," I whispered. It was to be a gallant but unsuccessful effort. Willerman prevailed by a neck.

Worse than losing the six hundred I never had, and worse than not being able to come up with the rent, was the gruesome prospect of returning to my seat next to Swine. The human soul can endure just so much torment. There was little satisfaction in knowing that the miserable, gut-wrenching

ordeal Orson was experiencing could surpass my own. Weed would lose his license and be banned from every racetrack in the country. An extremely broke Orson would simply be banned from the Miami tracks.

"So, you decided to come back."

I sagged into the aisle seat next to him as the participants for the tenth race paraded to the gate. "I see you survived the heart attack."

"I just made that up," Swine confessed. He fished his ticket out. "You did good, Joe. I appreciate it."

"Glad you feel that way. Looks like I'm going to have to move in with you after all."

"Didn't work out, huh?"

"Nope."

"Well, don't worry about it. Look at the odds on Sierra Sun—thirty-five to one." He kissed the ticket. "I got thirty-six hundred bucks right here in my hot little hand. I'll give you the odd six hundred for makin' the bet after Sierra Sun wires this bunch."

"Right—I'm lookin' forward to it."

Sierra Sun broke on top and won off by sixteen lengths in a hand ride.

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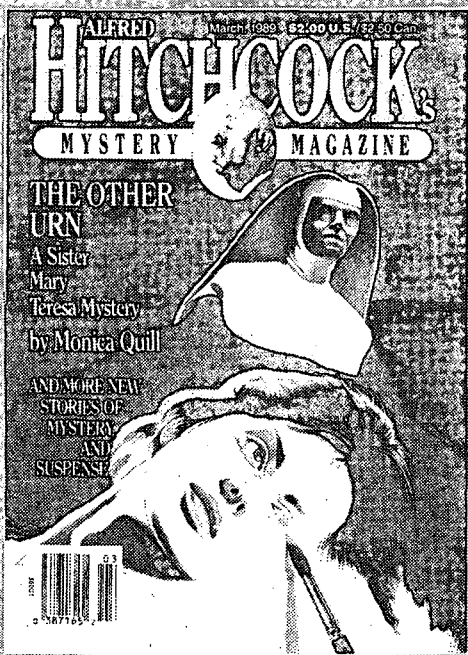
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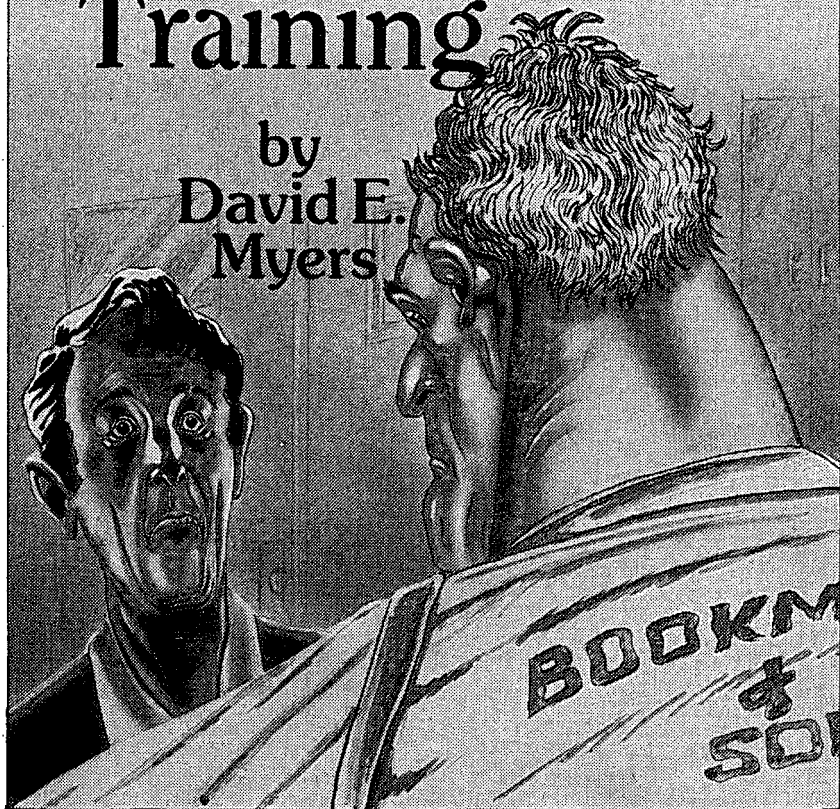
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FICTION

Assertiveness Training

by
David E.
Myers



I can only think of four assertive behaviors that I've done since last week's meeting with Dr. Larsen.

I would have had five if I hadn't taken so long in telling the Cablevision salesman that

I didn't want cable, even though the New Basic Package had thirty-one channels and FM radio and free HBO for a month, and the installation was half-price, and the Spanish Language and Home Shopping sta-

tions were included at no additional charge.

The four that I'm counting are telling Mother that I'm not attending the family picnic at Loon Lake this summer, sitting next to Julie in the lunchroom yesterday, writing the letter to the *Seattle Times*, and asking the girl at McDonald's for extra ketchup.

That leaves me three short of the objectives Dr. Larsen set for me.

I'm such a weenie.

I open the door and walk into Dr. Larsen's office, where two things strike me—the heavy-metal rock music blaring from the radio, and the big guy in blue overalls holding Dr. Larsen's computer monitor in his hands.

"Excuse me," I say, in a loud voice, "is Dr. Larsen here?"

The guy clears his throat, then replies, "Uh, no, the doc ran downstairs to his new office. He said he'd be right back."

"He's moving?" I ask.

The guy turns around so I can see the red lettering stitched across his broad back. It reads BOOKMAN & SONS, MOVING AND STORAGE.

The doc said he'd be right back," the guy says, again.

I sit down on the couch and watch him set the monitor on

a flat pushcart that is already half filled. Then he piles on the printer and cables, a typewriter, and the telephone answering machine, all very quickly like a professional.

Soon the desk is cleared, except for the clock radio, some journals, and a green desk blotter.

He begins to disconnect the tape recorder on the bookshelf, then asks, "You one of the doc's patients?"

I answer, "Yes."

I sense an awkward lull and recall one of Dr. Larsen's suggestions on how to converse with new acquaintances—ask them about themselves.

"Are you Bookman or Son?" I ask. And I realize that's five assertive behaviors.

He answers, "Uh, the old man's retired. So I'm both."

We're still shouting when we speak and I say, "Mind if I turn off the radio?" which I do and I think, six!

The room is now quiet and I hear a faint thumping noise coming from the closet, as though someone is kicking on the door from the inside, and I suddenly realize that Dr. Larsen is not downstairs. And Bookman is staring right at me with this nasty look on his face and all I can think is, *seven?*

FICTION

Yellow Drums

© CHIRONNA '86

by Stephen
Wasylyk

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Holding the car at a steady seventy through the flatness of the Ohio valley and the mountainous sliver of West Virginia, he crossed into Pennsylvania shortly after midnight, almost alone on the dark interstate, facing six hours more of purring engine, whispering tires, and mesmerizing road uncurling beneath his headlight beams.

Leaden eyes, already watery with grief, threatened to close. He slipped a cassette of Sousa marches into his radio and turned up the volume until "The Washington Post March" filled the car. If anything could keep him awake, those blood-tingling marches would, and he found one hand beating time on the steering wheel.

Not until the last number of the first series faded did it occur to him that it was a little bizarre for a man who had learned his wife had been murdered to be conducting an invisible band as he drove through the night, and even though no one had seen him, *could* have seen him, he felt ashamed.

He flipped the cassette, returned both hands to the wheel, and kept them there, releasing it only to roll down the window and pick up his toll ticket when he entered the turnpike. A few minutes after "The Stars and

Stripes Forever," the perennial closing number, came to an end, his lights picked up a green and white *Food-Fuel* sign. Almost halfway there. It was time to fill the tank with gas and himself with black coffee.

The dawn was tinged with the orange promise of a hot day when he left the turnpike for I-76, a ratrace of a riverbank expressway already beginning to fill at that early hour with work-bound traffic and roaring semis that slammed toward the heart of Philadelphia in a palm-sweating, neverending daily race that could never have a winner.

Ahead, brake lights glowed and traffic slowed to a crawl as it funneled into one lane between concrete construction barriers and yellow-painted steel drums. Creeping along behind an enormous trailer truck belching odorous diesel fumes, he felt that a malevolent Fate hadn't been able to resist even this small pinprick of irritation.

You will forever creep through life behind a smelly semi, Bedford.

It was well after seven before he reached the police headquarters building.

Sergeant Hatares, black-haired, full mustache carefully trimmed, short, deep-chested, with muscles bulging under his

shortsleeved shirt, brought him a cup of coffee, his face sympathetic.

"I wish there had been an easier way to tell you, Mr. Bedford."

"You didn't tell me much." Bedford held the cup in one hand and scrubbed his face with the other. The air conditioning was set too high or not working properly. His shirt clung to his back, and it was difficult to keep his eyes open. "But then maybe you did. I didn't hear much of anything after you told me she was—"

Hatares leaned back in his chair. "I understand. Late yesterday we received a call from a man named Fleming. Do you know him?"

"The vice-president in charge of her department. He came to our table one evening as we were having dinner."

"She didn't report for work yesterday, and when he didn't hear from her by afternoon, he went to her apartment building and asked the superintendent to look into it. They found her on the floor of the bedroom, strangled. There didn't seem to have been much of a struggle; there was no sign of anyone's breaking in, and nothing appeared to be missing, although we really have no way of knowing that. The autopsy tomorrow will be more definite, but the

preliminary finding is that she was killed early Sunday evening. Fleming, of course, knew you owned a shop in Dayton and gave us your phone number. As I said, I wish there had been an easier way to notify you. How long had she been in Philadelphia?"

"They offered her the job about a year ago," he said slowly.

"Then I don't suppose you've seen much of her since then."

"It wasn't the same as living together, but Dayton isn't that far away. A good day's drive, so we had quite a few weekends together. I came here or she drove to Dayton, or we'd meet in Pittsburgh or somewhere else about halfway. When we couldn't get together, we'd talk on the phone or write. I spoke to her Saturday morning. Neither of us could make it for the weekend. If we had—"

"Ever talk about the people she knew, what she was doing?"

Bedford placed the untasted cup of coffee on the desk. "What are you getting at?"

"I told you there were no signs that anyone had broken into the apartment, so we're assuming she knew the killer. Since we have to check out all her friends, I thought you might come up with a name we didn't already have."

Bedford's eyes were closing again. "I understand. Fleming,

of course, and a woman named Wanda she was friendly with, and a few other people in the office. I didn't pay too much attention. They were people I didn't know and would probably never meet." He rubbed his eyes gently. "You wanted me to confirm the identification. Can we get it over with now? I drove all night and haven't had any sleep for twenty-four hours. I'd like to check into a hotel and take a nap. We can get together again this afternoon and do whatever else you feel is necessary then. My head will be much clearer."

Hatares scrambled to his feet. "Sure. Sorry. No problem at all."

As tired as he was, he couldn't sleep. Fully dressed, he lay on the bed in his hotel room, eyes closed, wondering if that heart-stopping image of her still, white face would ever fade.

It hadn't been necessary for her to work at all. The antique shop wouldn't make them wealthy, but it brought in enough to keep them comfortable. She could have done other things, but she'd been steadily moving upward in the corporation and saw no reason to give up what she'd gained. Long brown hair bouncing as she walked, body seemingly made

for the latest fashions, she was not only attractive but intelligent enough to sit back and listen and guide people, never finding it necessary to prove to herself or the world that she was sitting in that chair because she was better at what she did than anyone else, and not because of a corporate policy of promoting women. The people she'd worked with in Dayton had told him that.

You married a winner, Charlie. She doesn't waste our time by listening to us explain why the way she wants to do something won't work, and then trashing solid suggestions that would, because she feels she has to justify her title.

Good managers were rare and they'd both known it would someday come down—as it had—to that decision agonized over and finally made in the sleepless hours of an early morning as to whether she should take the promotion and go, or remain in Dayton.

He'd left the decision to her because if he'd insisted she turn them down, the words might never be said but they'd hang between them like a sheer curtain that would become more opaque through the years.

If it hadn't been for you, I might have—

Driving back after he'd helped her settle in, he told himself she

wouldn't want it after she tried it. On the way home three weeks ago, he knew it would take some sort of miracle to bring her back. There would be no miracle now.

Street noises penetrating the drawn blinds, a small draft from the air conditioner wafting across his face, sleep eluded him. The feel, the motion of the car was still with him, and he seemed to be rushing toward an unknown destination, alone and lonely, hemmed in by an ever-narrowing lane of those yellow-painted steel drums with control slipping away.

He swung out of bed, unbuttoning his shirt as he headed for the shower, pausing before the mirror on the door; a lanky scarecrow of a man in rumpled clothes below a thin, high-cheekboned face, his eyes shadowed and his dark hair curling down over his ears.

He'd need a haircut for the funeral. She'd never liked his hair long.

Hatares was waiting in his office.

"I'd like you to look over her apartment. My partner has our car, but I'll check out another."

"Any reason we can't use mine?"

"No, but since it's police business, I wouldn't want you to think the city is too cheap to provide transportation."

"That," said Bedford, "is the last thing that would enter my mind."

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Hatares asked, "Know how to get there?"

"I told you we got together here for several weekends." He waved at the row of the ubiquitous yellow drums blocking off the street. "Although this construction does screw me up."

"Hey, no one complains more than the people who live here. All we can do is hope it's worth it. The only thing good about it is that they're not always changing things around. Once you get to know where you can go and where you can't, you run into very few surprises."

The traffic moved slowly past the foliage green and brick red symmetry of Independence Park.

Hatares gestured. "Ever visit Independence Hall, see the Liberty Bell?"

Bedford's throat tightened. "Several times. We walked all over the historic area. My wife liked to do things like that."

"People from out of town generally do. Funny thing is, many people who live here don't. Not me. I stop in maybe three, four times a year. Maybe I'm crazy, but when I stand in Independence Hall, I can see all those guys in their knee breeches arguing about what kind of coun-

try they should make. I even think I see Ben Franklin looking at me over those funny glasses of his and saying, 'Welcome, Hatares, happy your parents could make it,' which my partner tells me is a little too imaginative for a dumb cop."

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The chase too often ends early.

"I don't think so," Bedford said slowly. "You're probably not the only one to feel that way."

Close to the river, the apartment house was one of a complex projecting like sun-washed, upraised fingers above the age-darkened brick of the row homes and other buildings, each surrounded by landscaped shrubbery and ringed by a driveway.

Hatares peeled away the police seal on the apartment door.

"We won't need this any longer. You'll be free to come and go as you please. The super will tell you how much time you'll have to remove her belongings, but I imagine there's no rush."

Bedford slowly walked around the sitting room. Their segmented lives had always made him uncomfortable here, as if he was intruding on a sanctum where the walls saw a person now strange to him and held secrets he would never know.

The air had the cool, recycled

staleness of a long closed motel room. Sliding doors led to a small balcony with a heavy wrought-iron railing and several pieces of metal outdoor furniture. He slid one open and took a deep breath.

The balcony overlooked the edge of the city and the river. To one side, sun flashed on miniature waves set up by a tanker moving slowly upstream. To the other, a gossamer layer of golden dust floated above the torn earth and the yellow drums and the concrete barricades just visible here and there between the tall buildings. They'd be there for another year or two before traffic could knife through the heart of the city without stopping.

In the bedroom, he avoided looking at the austerity of the undisturbed bed and the carpeted floor where she died, running his fingers over the objects on the vanity. Her purse was there, still closed. He opened the purse and went through her wallet. A hundred or more in cash, three credit cards projecting from a pocket. A small jewelry box, closed, was beside the purse.

"We remove valuables for safekeeping," said Hatares, "but I had them replaced this morning so that you could see it exactly as it was. We have photos and an inventory, so you may

take anything you like."

He lifted a hand and shook his head. If anyone wanted to steal something now, they were welcome to it.

A photo of the two of them on the corner of the vanity, their arms around each other, brought a sudden lump to his throat. He turned away quickly.

"Nothing seems to be missing, but she could have bought a piece of jewelry, something—" He shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"I understand. I suppose you'll stay in town for a few days, removing her possessions. I'll be happy to help."

"No. She has a sister. She'll do that. She'll be better than I with these woman's things—" He waved a hand. "I don't ever want to see this place again."

Hatares locked the door and handed him the keys. "Her car is in the garage downstairs. I didn't know she had a sister. I would have thought she'd have come with you. Handling this sort of thing alone— But then it might have been too hard on her."

"I left a few hours after your call. She has three small children to take care of and couldn't leave them on such short notice. I called her from the hotel. Her husband has arranged to stay with them, so I'll go back tonight and get her."

"That's a lot of driving."

"It's easy enough. Turnpike and interstate all the way. We should be back tomorrow evening. I'll call you when we get in. When will the—" He couldn't get the word out.

"The body should be ready for release before you get here."

They were walking toward the car through the still, humid air of the underground garage when a sedan came down the ramp and stopped beside them.

The driver, young and black and smooth-skinned, his hair cropped short, looked at Bedford, his face impassive, before turning to Hatares.

"They told me you were here, Ramon."

"Sure." Hatares motioned Bedford to go on. "I'll be with you in a minute, Mr. Bedford."

The car interior was warm. Bedford opened the door wide and leaned on the roof, watching Hatares.

The man in the car did most of the talking, the sergeant nodding now and then before he stepped away and waved the car on.

He grunted as he slid in beside Bedford.

"My partner. He's been checking out your wife's friends and her movements during the weekend."

Bedford turned toward the ramp. "I hope he's come up with a suspect."

"Oh, we have plenty of those. There's you, for instance."

Bedford glanced at him coldly. "Do you have a some sort of police reason for making me angry? I know it can't be personal."

"Calm down. Look at it from our point of view. There could be motive here. Your wife leaves you for a job in another city a year ago. You could be understanding and supportive as they like to say today, but then you could be mad as hell as many men would be. I don't know how much revenue that shop in Dayton brings in, but I suspect it can't produce the kind of income your wife had, and some men feel that when a wife draws a bigger paycheck, it's demeaning." Hatares grinned. "Not me. If mine made that kind of money, I'd chauffeur her to work every morning after bringing her breakfast on a silver tray. But that's neither here nor there. Another possibility. Your wife is a fine looking woman and you're almost six hundred miles away. She could be having an affair and you find about it."

Bedford eased around a plodding horse pulling a couple of sightseeing tourists in a patriotically painted carriage, the street cool and shaded, the red brick of the sidewalks worn and uneven.

"Let me straighten you out.

Taking the transfer was a mutual decision. If it was a bad move, she could always come home. Furthermore, a nice portion of that high salary went into the shop, because the shop was her ace in the hole. We were both aware that the higher you go on the corporate ladder, the shakier it gets, particularly for a woman. With the shop behind her, she couldn't be intimidated. She could do her job the way she felt it should be done. You may not realize it, but when you're good at your job, having an alternative gives you an independence that people around you hesitate to challenge. Aside from all that, the fact that I *was* almost six hundred miles away should have answered any question you had."

Hatares sighed. "Distance isn't necessarily a problem today, Mr. Bedford, so I looked into it after I talked to you. I couldn't see you coming by air. The schedule doesn't really fit. You could drive, of course, just as you did. Last night, to be sure I was touching all the bases, I asked the Dayton police to talk to your neighbors. According to the call I got today, they say your car was in the driveway Sunday evening. If it hadn't been, I'd be asking where you were."

Bedford half turned into a northbound street, found it

blocked by the yellow drums, and slid back into the traffic flow.

"If you *are* trying to make me angry, you've succeeded."

"No offense intended, Mr. Bedford, just explaining. And maybe trying to reassure you that we're not overlooking any possibility so that if we don't find whoever killed your wife, it won't be because we didn't try. What do you think of Fleming?"

"I don't think anything of Fleming."

"Let me give you my impression. Typical young corporate executive on his way to the top. Good-looking, impressive sort of guy. And divorced. Seems to me the type who would hit on every good-looking woman who crossed his path. Your wife ever mention something like that?"

"No, but then she never felt it necessary to keep me informed of every man who made a pass at her."

"Well, we're looking into the possibility. Two people like that on a nice summer weekend seems like a natural, and it won't be difficult to check out."

Bedford glanced at him. "Why would *he* kill her?"

"Maybe they *were* having an affair and things got out of hand. Maybe he felt she was a threat to him, something to do with corporate politics. Why

people kill each other isn't always immediately apparent, Mr. Bedford."

Bedford eased toward the sidewalk. "Unless there's something more you want from me, I'll let you out at the curb."

"Not a thing," said Hatares cheerfully. "You've been very cooperative, and if a question comes up I haven't thought of, well, you'll be back tomorrow. Give me a call. As I said, I'll be happy to help in any way."

He stepped out and bent to peer in at him.

"And don't be angry with me, Mr. Bedford. I'm just doing what they pay me for."

Bedford glanced into the mirror as he pulled away. Hatares was heading toward the entrance, walking fast, as though he had something to do that couldn't wait.

So much to be done, so many arrangements to be made.

The numbness inside was being steadily eroded by a growing layer of grief, and Bedford hoped that when it finally filled him, he could keep from screaming.

He lay on his bed for several hours, looking for a few hours of sleep to still the images in his mind and waiting for the sun to sink low because his eyes couldn't take driving into it.

At twilight, locked in the single lane of traffic hurtling out

of the city and behind the inevitable semi, he looked up into a mirror filled with the image of a huge, menacing radiator of another close behind and for a moment was tempted to twitch the wheel into the concrete barricade and let it crush him into oblivion.

Aside from being a few years older, his sister-in-law wasn't much different from his wife. She had the same attractiveness, confidence, and self-control and could probably have done as well if she'd decided on a career instead of a family. He didn't know if that type of similarity was unusual or common, but real difference was inside, a way of measuring life or judging values, which was why they had taken different paths. Watching her say goodbye to her children, he'd felt a vague longing and regret.

He hadn't wanted to see the apartment ever again, but he'd had to show her where it was and how to get there. He retreated to the balcony, listening to small whispering noises coming from the bedroom where she was going through his wife's things, deciding what would go back with them and what would be disposed of here, taking care of only one of the dozens of details necessary to close out

someone's life. When they were all done, it would be as though his wife had never existed.

The wrought-iron chairs before him were only a few feet from each other. Several times during the warming spring weather, he'd sat there with her, wondering how two people so close together on a small patch of concrete could be so far apart.

Someone tapped at the door. He opened it to find Hatares.

"I intended to call you later."

Hatares smiled. "I knew you'd have other things on your mind, so I asked the clerk at the hotel to let me know when you checked in. When I didn't find you there, I knew you'd be here."

His sister-in-law came out of the bedroom, eyes questioning. He introduced her. Hatares held out his hand, the sympathy in his voice sincere.

"I'm sorry you have to go through this. If there's anything I can do to help, just ask."

"I appreciate that, but the most important thing you can do for me is tell me you found out who did this and why. It might make it all easier, although I don't know how."

He took her by the arm. "Let's sit down, shall we?"

Facing them across the coffee table between the twin sofas, elbows on knees, hands laced

together, and voice soft, he said, "These things always take time, some more than others, but in this case we were lucky. We started out by putting together her last weekend." He looked at Bedford. "Phone company records say she did call you Saturday morning, at nine to be precise. You said neither of you could make it for the weekend. Mind telling me what else you talked about?"

"Nothing much."

"The call lasted for an hour and a half."

Bedford left the sofa and stood looking out of the balcony door. "Would that be so unusual between a wife and husband?"

Hatares turned to his sister-in-law. "When did you last speak to your sister?"

"The previous weekend. I tried to call her Sunday evening, but there was no answer." Her voice broke. "I assumed she was out."

"Did she ever tell you that she was having an affair with Fleming? It took two days to dig that out of him because he felt it had no bearing on her murder."

Darkness had come in the short time they had been in the apartment, and the scattered lights seemed to lead here, there, nowhere. No direction in his life now, not even toward the low rosiness slowly fading in the west. The skies over Dayton

might be perceptibly brighter at the moment, but to him they'd been dark since she'd called.

His sister-in-law's voice was a whisper. "Yes, some time ago."

"Mr. Bedford?"

Bedford half turned.

"Did she tell you Saturday morning she intended to file for divorce?"

"No."

"Fleming says she told him she did when he talked to her later."

He shrugged. "So she did. So what? Fleming was right. It was between the three of us. It had nothing to do with this."

"I hoped not, and it certainly seemed that way because while you may have had a motive, it didn't appear you had the opportunity. But yesterday, Mr. Bedford, you tried to turn into a street that had been blocked off for months. It was opened only temporarily during the weekend. I worried about that. Was it simply a mistake, or did you turn without thinking because you had taken that street Sunday evening?"

His sister-in-law had done the driving this time. He'd slumped beside her, eyes closed, listening to the wind and seeing the white, still face of his wife. A vague pain in the nape of his neck radiated downward to meet the sharp one in his lower back.

"You said my car was in the driveway in Dayton."

"True enough, but there is no rule that says you couldn't drive another. Assuming that the numbers I'd taken from your wife's credit cards were duplicates to yours, to ease my mind I asked the Dayton police to see if any had been used to rent a car for the weekend. I'm sorry to say that they found one. Rented Saturday and returned Monday morning, the odometer showing almost exactly twice the distance between Dayton and Philadelphia. That model couldn't make it from there to here on one tank of gas, Mr. Bedford, so I had the state police check the food and fuel stops along the turnpike about halfway between. They turned up two of your credit card slips, one at an eastbound stop and the other at a westbound, that showed you had filled the tank on that rental car twice on Sunday. You *had* been here, Mr. Bedford. Would you mind telling me for how long and what you did? I'm damned sure you didn't spend the time sightseeing."

Leaning against the frame of the balcony door, he watched a brightly lighted cruise ship move slowly down the river, Hatares' voice overridden by the one in his mind.

"It's so exciting, Charlie. I can

see the river and most of the city, and it feels, it really does, as though I have the world at my feet."

The phone rang, sounding exceptionally harsh.

"I'll get it," said Hatares. "I'm expecting a call."

How do you measure failure? Everyone considered him successful. He had a wide reputation as an authority in his field and the shop did well, but what people thought of you wasn't important. What was important was how close you came to capturing and holding all your dreams, and only you knew that.

Hatares' voice was a low murmur behind him.

Somewhere in the past, he must have taken a wrong turn and his life had been channeled into a dead end, the way it had been on Sunday afternoon by those damned confusing yellow drums.

Streets opened, streets closed, like the one Hatares referred to. In another area he'd missed a directional sign and the drums had stretched alongside, forcing him into a section of the city he didn't know. What he thought had been a break appeared, and he'd turned to find a barrier and a torn street before him with more drums hemming him in so that he couldn't turn right or left.

He'd thrown his head back and screamed in frustration, the sound piercing the fog of insanity that had brought him there. Covered by a sudden sweat, he'd stared at the drums trapping him before throwing the car into reverse, backing out and heading home, weaving in and out of traffic frantically as though fleeing a pursuing horror.

There was no backing out of the trap now. The numbness inside was gone and the grief filled him at last.

Screaming won't help this time, Charlie.

Hatares cradled the phone and called: "Mr. Bedford?"

He stepped out on to the balcony. It took Hatares a couple of heartbeats to realize what he was doing, and he yelled and leaped over the sofa and stumbled and fell, his fingers brushing Bedford's heel as he stepped up on to the seat of a wrought-iron chair and then to the railing, where he balanced for a moment and was gone, as Hatares, face down, slowly beat the cement with one hand.

The ambulance gone, the crowd drifting away, his sister-in-law sat on the low stone wall surrounding the landscaped shrubbery at the base of the building, twisting a tear-soaked handkerchief slowly. Behind her, concealed

floodlights bathed the lower floors of the building, the upper ones in shadow. At the base of the driveway, a yellow tape and a couple of blue uniforms kept the television crews and other media at bay.

Hatares joined her, wondering if his face had aged as much as hers in the split second Bedford stepped off the railing, and turned his head to look up at the balconies fading into the darkness, lips thinning.

"My fault he's dead. He was a suspect and I should have kept him under control. If I had, he couldn't have jumped. The brass will ream me for screwing up, but that won't bother me as much as having to live with my own stupidity."

Voice thick with shock, she said, "I would never have believed he killed her."

He took a long time to speak. "I think there's something about your sister you'd like to know. She and Fleming had an early dinner in the building restaurant. He left about six thirty because she wanted to be alone. Her conscience was bothering her because it dawned on her that telling her husband over the phone that the marriage was over wasn't just thoughtless but rather cruel, especially since she had no quarrel with him and he'd done nothing to deserve it."

"It wasn't the first time she

treated him without the consideration she'd have given anyone in the office," she murmured.

"She was considering going to Dayton and facing him on Monday, which was why Fleming wasn't concerned when she didn't show up at the office. She'd said she'd let him know. When he didn't hear from her by afternoon, he became worried and went to the apartment. It will take a while for him to stop blaming himself for leaving her in the lobby on Sunday."

Her voice was bitter. "Do you mind if I don't feel sorry for him?"

"Your sister ever mention a Mrs. Alvarez?"

She nodded. "Her housekeeper."

"Well, Mrs. Alvarez earns her money. When she cleans, she really cleans. Furniture, woodwork, whatever. She did the apartment Saturday, so the only prints we picked up were your sister's and a few which the odds said had to be the killer's. In a case like that, you keep your mouth shut until all possible suspects have been checked. Fleming's were no go. I took your brother-in-law's from a coffee cup I handed him yesterday morning and was waiting for a comparison." He shook his head. "Sometimes those people feel they have other things to do that are more im-

portant. I was sure those prints in the apartment were his. He'd lied about being here and he sure as hell had a good motive."

"Her phone call," she said.

"It must have jarred him to his toenails. Funny thing about phone calls. Maybe it's this job, but sometimes I get to the point where I hate to pick up the damned thing because you never know if what you'll hear will be good or bad. Take that call I got right before he jumped. I'd noticed your sister kept her apartment key on the same ring as her car keys, one of those come-apart things."

She nodded. "We both used them. They keep your house key out of the hands of a stranger when you have to leave your car keys at a parking garage or when your car is serviced."

"I suppose there must be millions in the country. I didn't think anything of it until yesterday. While waiting for your brother-in-law to look over the apartment, I tried to take them apart. I couldn't. The mechanism was jammed. It could mean something or nothing, but it was worth a shot. My partner spent all day tracking down the places where she might have left the car recently. When he worked his way down to the dealer's where she'd had her car serviced, he recognized one of the men there as a small-time

thief, so he gambled."

Her head slowly turned toward him as though she couldn't believe what he was saying.

"He brought him in, held up the man's rap sheet, pointed at the fingerprints, and smiled. He didn't have to say a word. Your sister wasn't the only one with a guilty conscience. The man couldn't talk fast enough. He'd been making duplicates of customers' apartment and house keys for some time, staking them out, and moving in when he knew they would be out for a few hours. Your sister generally didn't get back to her apartment on Sunday evening until nine or so. She surprised the hell out of him when she walked in. He panicked, killed her because

she recognized him, and took off without taking a thing."

"Oh my god." Her voice was flat with horror. "So Charlie didn't—"

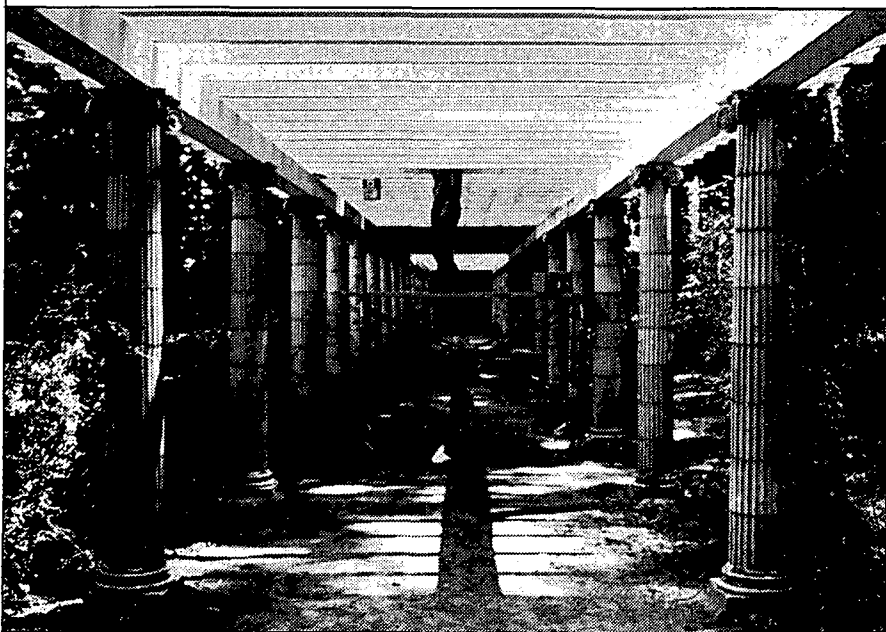
"No question he intended to. Her. Or Fleming. Or both. He'd have no other reason for renting a car so that no one would know he was here. I wish I knew what stopped him."

Hatares looked up at the building again. "None of which changes anything. He's dead because I screwed up, and an apology isn't enough."

Slowly, her hands twisted the handkerchief into a tight white rope.

"No. It wasn't your fault. Or mine. Or hers. Or even Fleming's. Charlie chose his own road."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



c. N. Jav Jaffee

Pruned? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

On the Street Again

by Dan Crawford

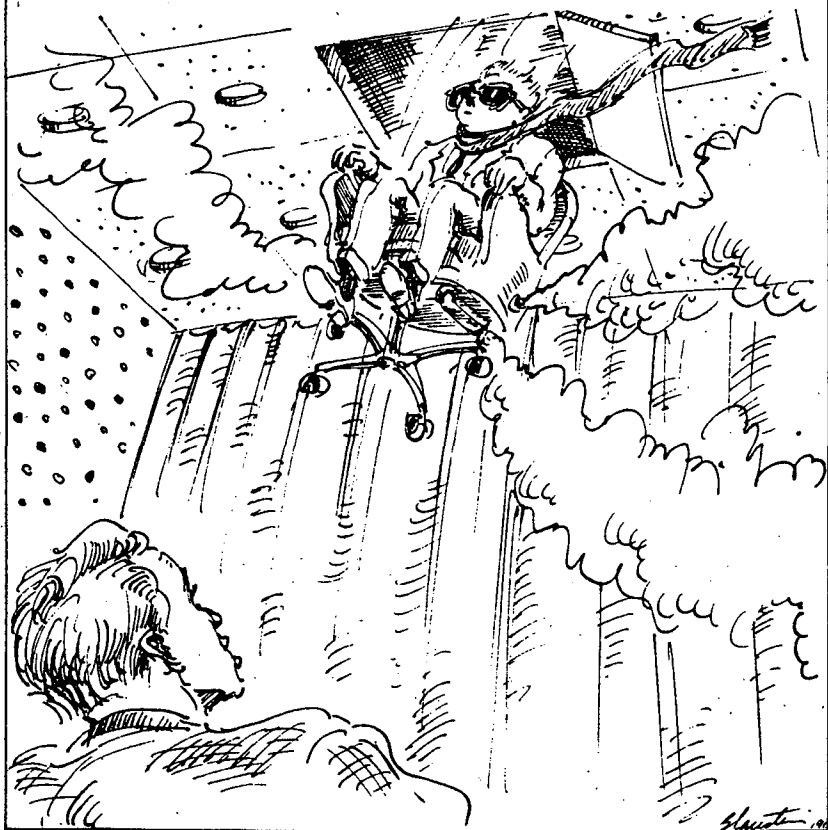


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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““N0, no!” I shrieked.
“Next screen!
Next screen!”

But it was too late, and pounding on the desk didn't do a bit of good. I was using a cheap, quickie keyboard, with all the buttons crammed together in a lump for easy assembly. My finger had been the merest hair to the left.

“Access number?” the screen inquired, daring me to start all over. Instead of punching in the first of the security codes, I spelled out a few suggestions based on words scrawled on the sidewalk outside the building. I was denied access, of course, but it felt good.

Ajax had spoken the computer's language. In the time it took me just to access the records, he could have been through them all, summarized his findings, and made me a chicken salad sandwich, except that he hated to get mayonnaise on his fingers. Of course, if ordered to do so, the office computer could have summarized the reports just as well, but it wouldn't have known what I was looking for.

I grabbed my coat and twisted my scarf around my throat. The door slammed when I was through with it, rattling the glass window labeled AJAX DETECTIVE AGENCY. *Gordon MacGregor, Pres.* If I got the

right breaks on this case, I'd have to replace it with a revolving door, to handle the crowds of clients.

It was, or might be, widescale insurance fraud. Five of my competitors and I were on it, for different clients, and the insurance cops were busy as well. We were none of us getting anywhere. Part of the problem was that no one had turned up any hard evidence to prove there *was* fraud.

A rash of clients had invoked the suicide clause in their policies. If notified beforehand of a subject's intent to commit, the company pays half the usual benefits to the client's beneficiary. The company pays nothing if the client neglects this courtesy. The clause gives the company an even chance to prevent the suicide, thus saving the life of a paying customer.

Not only had there been a sharp upswing in the number of suicides, but most of the cases involved business executives who deliberately walked into space protected by the Fundamental Security Systems Last Stop Security Guards. The Last Stop system was designed to eliminate intruders, and left only a nameless pile of ash. The robot guards were themselves of moderate intelligence, and though they weren't designed to recognize their own com-

pany's executive staff, they were able to testify that they had crisped an intruder answering the description at such and such a time. And the insurance company, though suspicious, couldn't claim they had no proof that the pile of ash was their client, because said client had called up and told them what he intended to do, when he intended to do it, and how. The company always had to pay, and insurance companies are traditionally mifty about that.

Forty-seven such suicides had occurred in a little under fifteen months. It was too much of a coincidence to really be one. But twelve insurance companies, forty-nine separate insurance agencies, and seventy-nine assorted beneficiaries were involved. If there was a plot, none of us had picked out yet how everyone was connected.

The O'Hara Insurance Brokers had retained me to find out who was getting money with what, and how it was done, graciously supplying me with the access numbers that had done me mighty little good so far. At this point, I was just flipping through files, looking for any little thing, any anomaly, that might give me a lead. Nothing turned up, even when the computer wasn't fighting me. It didn't matter much. They were paying me for my time, whether

a conspiracy came into view or not. But I couldn't shake the feeling that Ajax would have found something. Mind you, there were other mechanical minds on the job, but none with the experience and touch that Ajax had.

I fitted on my gloves and mask. The weather was perfect for a walk, in my mood. It was only November, but a blizzard had blasted in from the north. The Weather Control is operational, but it backfires as often as it works. No one had announced anything yet, but I figured this was one of the goofs.

Snow and some hail smacked against the glass of the walkway. I peered through at traffic. The speed limit on the top level is eighty-five, but nobody was going more than a tenth that.

I reached the Munby Building and took the elevator down to Godfrey's U&U Warehouse. Used and unemployed robots find basic shelter and maintenance in these places and wait to be looked over by prospective buyer/employers. Lately I was going there only twice a week. I knew nothing like another Ajax would be turning up.

Now, understand, I was just making things hard on myself. I could have bought a model similar to my last partner and given him Ajax's job. Ajax wasn't all that expensive or

scarce, and without mortgaging my future, I could have had a robot that looked like Ajax, talked like Ajax, and had a personality like Ajax. But it wouldn't have been Ajax. Ajax and I had worked together long enough to know each other's jokes, how the other worked, how to operate, man to robot. To get another Ajax would have confused matters. I'd mix him up with the original, expect him to perform with all the skill and moxie Ajax had accumulated in his career. It would've been like telling a widower he could have his wife back but that she wouldn't remember a thing that had happened since the wedding.

It would be easier to start over with someone new than try to make a replica of the original.

Godfrey was glad to see me. He knew, sooner or later, he was going to sell me something. "Ah, I have a deal for you today, Gordon," he cackled, rubbing dry palms together.

I know all about Godfrey's deals. I helped get him arrested for some of them. "Forget it," I told him, by way of greeting.

"No, no," he said, taking me by the cuff. "You've got to take a look at this."

He led me past rows of uninterested or deactivated mechanical devices. We took the

elevator down to the floor where he keeps larger machinery. "I have a car," I told him, as he pulled me toward a garage.

"Ha!" he said, and pressed a little square on the wall. A green door clacked up into the ceiling.

Behind it sat a glittering gem of that deep red-black that seemed to have come from beyond the stars, and which had been imitated a million times. My eyes ran over the long, sleek lines that had become a cliché.

"Big deal, Godfrey," I said, turning to look at a tank he had tried to hide in another corner of the warehouse. "Another Hengest ripoff. Hold it a couple of years and after the detective agency goes bankrupt, maybe I'll start a classic car museum."

Godfrey yanked my sleeve hard enough to turn me toward the garage. "It isn't a copy, Gordon," he whispered. "This is Hengest."

I looked from Godfrey to the long fins and wingboards, and then I looked back at Godfrey. He let go of my sleeve and scampered over to open the dark red door.

"Take a look," he said. "All the features. Lox drive. Refuel twice every hundred and fifty years."

Just to humor him, I leaned forward and peeked into the front seat. I refused to believe

that this was real velvet. "In my line of work, Godfrey, it's sometimes better not to be sitting on a tank of liquid oxygen."

He wagged fingers at me like he was brushing my words away. "What do you think, Gordon? It's shielded. And besides the usual armament and police armament, it's got . . . well, sit down and look."

It is death to the wallet to sit in the front seat of a car while the dealer is watching. I did it anyway. If nothing else, this was the best imitation Hengest I'd ever seen.

I put one hand on the steering wheel, passing the other over a bigger display of dials and screens than you'd find in a game arcade. "You know how I am with machinery," I said. "I hope this comes with an operator's manual."

"Er, Gordon . . ." Godfrey started to say.

A little red light snapped on on the dashboard. "My instructional mode is fully operational, sir," said a very cold voice.

I didn't need an ejector seat to go through the roof. This was not the first car that had ever talked to me. But your average talking car limits itself to choppy sentences about oil pressure and speed. Some do ozone and weather reports when you put on the brakes, and open the

door. But very few of them start conversations with you, and I had never heard one sound quite so contemptuous.

I shifted carefully in the seat, trying not to crush the velvet. "So," I said, in a conversational way. "Is this hoodlum telling the truth? Are you the one and only prototype Hengest?"

"No," answered the voice, with pure scorn. "There were six of us, but five perished in testing. I am that surviving example about which increasingly fatuous stories have been written over the past generation."

I had read most of those stories. I couldn't recall the Hengest in them being so touchy. I climbed out quick to have a private chat with Godfrey.

"Good day, sir," said the car. "I'm so happy we had this time together." I was barely away from the spot when the garage door crashed down behind me. Godfrey was nowhere near the button.

"I should have warned you," said Godfrey. "He's sort of . . . moody."

The Hengest had been designed as the biggest advance in police work since Dick Tracy introduced the two-way wrist radio. The talking, thinking car had been intended as transportation and partner, all in one package. The prototype had been issued to Captain Christopher

Cassell, who had become one of the top cops of his day.

Somehow, however, this fleet of talking squad cars never materialized. A passenger model never got off the drawing boards. I guessed it was like having a talking dog: you think it would be fun until he starts arguing with you. Only the ripoffs, the nonintelligent cars that copied only the exterior design of the Hengest, ever made a hit.

I pulled Godfrey across the room. "Where did you get that thing?" I demanded when I thought we were at a safe distance.

"It's not a thing," he told me, raising his chin. "That's Hengest."

"And what's Hengest doing in a U&U Warehouse?" I said. "Especially your U&U Warehouse."

"It's clean," he protested. "All square! You could look it up!"

"I will," I promised him. I went out to the street to get on the train, but decided it would be faster to go back the way I'd come, on the walkway. At the office, I gave the computer a good thump to show I remembered it, and tapped in a new set of access codes.

While it chewed on those, I hauled out half a dozen comic books and true crime compendiums I keep in the waiting room to amuse the clientele. I

checked out the sections of Cassell and Hengest, more for their nostalgia value than as research.

From the computer, I got more hard data. Captain Christopher Cassell had died in action. Hengest had gone on working without him for two years. Five more police detectives had died on duty with him. There had been a slide on the ice, or the headlights had flicked on a second too soon, and somebody got killed. They were all accidents, of course, because, after all, who could distrust Hengest?

The police detectives could, and they refused to work with him. The company that built Hengest, and which was losing money on him, took him back, promising to iron out the problem. They never did. They still had a lock on the technology, though. Every couple of years there'd be an article about the new fleet of Hengests that would soon be available. Then the flurry would die down. As far as anyone knew, that one original Hengest was the only intelligent car ever built.

Retired cars can't exactly go on the lecture circuit, and talk show sets aren't built for that big a guest. They tried him in a company showroom, and then a museum. He started to say unprintable things to the wor-

shipful kids who came up and got thumbprints on the doorhandles. He went into storage. His last listed home had been a warehouse, demolished ten years before. A junk dealer had bought up the contents, presumably for scrap. There were no records about Hengest after that.

It sounded like one of Godfrey's deals, and there certainly wasn't anything on the record to show he'd done anything illegal. I thought about it for a long time. Me, in Captain Cassell's seat. It was like buying a spot in the batting lineup of the 1927 Yankees.

I rode down to the garage and studied my old Ontasazi 85A, with its blue basketwork roof and tattered seams. It had seen a lot of action with me; those scorchmarks never came from the dryers at the car wash. Could I trade a familiar old heap like this in, even for Hengest?

That decision took me about fourteen seconds.

Godfrey had stayed open a little late, and didn't pretend to be surprised to see me. "You'll never regret this," he said as we swapped keys and made the proper entries in the registration records. "I expect to see you on the front page any day now."

I didn't tell him they were

printing obituaries in a separate section these days. We were too close to Hengest's kennel.

"This is your new owner, Gordon MacGregor," said Godfrey, his tone bold and hearty. "I'm sure you'll get along real well."

Hengest was noncomital. I climbed into that front seat again and studied the dash.

"Instructional mode?" Hengest inquired.

But there were diagrams in those old comic books, diagrams I had pored over at thirteen. Having refreshed my brain with those, I could reach out and switch on the ignition.

"Smarter than you look," said Hengest.

"I have to be," I told him. I looked around for Godfrey. He had retreated to a neutral corner and was raising the door that led out onto the local traffic entrance ramp.

"Don't you scrape me on that door," Hengest ordered.

"I won't," I informed him, and eased my way out onto the street. Godfrey waved.

Now given the fact that I was driving a car I didn't know, whose controls were as complex as the menu at the electronic automat, and who didn't seem to like me very much, I had intended to just drive to my private parking stall at home and not try anything fancy. But

Hengest, all other considerations aside, was a mighty sleek road machine, and once settled into the flow of traffic, I couldn't resist going for a spin. Laramie, taking tickets at the Morilan Fine Arts Theatre for the Betty Boop Retrospective, should be allowed to see what I was driving these days.

"Tsk," said Hengest, as I slipped past the yellow light at Michigan.

When he turned right on Ontario, he said, "Oops!" I said nothing. I was trying to be very friendly. It doesn't come easy, but I had been practicing for years.

Just the same, I hoped there would be a spot in the parking garage over the theater. Trying to parallel park wouldn't be easy with a running commentary.

A cab stopped suddenly in front of me to pick up a fare. I saw an opening and zipped around him. Hengest gasped and then sighed with relief once we were clear.

"You know," he said conversationally, "they just don't drive the way they did in my day. I suppose the government cut funding for driver education."

I was so jittery I took the next corner a lot too close. I heard a bang.

"Oh, good going!" said Hengest.

"Sorry," I told him. "Is it bad?"

"It didn't feel good," he snapped. I spotted an empty parking lot next to a Cerulan temple and pulled in.

"I'll just check," I said.

"Nice of you to take the time," Hengest replied.

I opened the door. But because I'm not completely senile yet, I took off my gloves, rolled them up, and let them drop into the door jamb, just ahead of the hinge. This is what my gloves are for, and why I still wear the bulky old nondisposable kind.

It was possible that I had hit something. But anybody who had read as many Hengest stories as I had growing up, knew Hengest was equipped with sound simulation devices. The parking lot wasn't well lit, and the whistle of the wind through the eyeholes in the fence wasn't reassuring. I eased around the back, keeping an eye on the ground and the other turned toward the front seat.

When I saw the accelerator move, I moved too. Hengest sailed ten feet forward and I jumped six feet back. Hengest hung a hook and came back to me.

It was not Hengest's style to kill anyone outright, according to the records I had read. There was no cover to make for. And it would not engender a good

car-owner relationship for him to see me run. So I held my position, which was kind of crouched and shaky, and tried to remember all this.

He missed me by the breadth of a dime, made another U-turn at the end of the lot, and came back around. Just before he got to me, he reared, as though to drop his whole weight on me. I'd splatter less that way, I supposed.

I didn't know where his eyes were, but I was sure he could keep track of me. So I didn't move—much. I eased a little toward the passenger side, and he swung that way, too, but too far, so he would miss me by the thickness of a twenty this time. He was trying to scare me into returning him for a refund, thus saving us both a lot of trouble.

But that's my business. I figured even Hengest couldn't jerk back up once gravity took over. When I felt he had passed the point of no return, I dropped and rolled toward his rear wheels. As he landed, missing me a little closer than either of us had planned, I bounced up and lunged through the open door. He swung in a circle, to throw me out by centrifugal force.

But I had read more than just history and comic book stories today. I slammed a thumb against the override button and

took over the controls myself. Retrieving my gloves, I slammed the door shut and we took a long drive, up to the through-way and out of the city.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Then a little light flipped on and Hengest said, "Well, I guess you can drive, after all."

"Aren't you rushing things?" I panted. "You ought to lull me into a false sense of security first."

I swear he snorted. "You're faster than you look," he told me. "I never expected someone who looked like you to be light on his feet. Just wait till next time."

I nodded. "How many will that make for you?" I asked him. "Don't you feel like having pictures of your kills on a gun-wale, just to keep track?"

He didn't answer. "Everybody knows those weren't accidents," I told him.

He growled at me. "Think it was easy? After years of real work, to go down to training rookies, barely out of training, some of them not even shaving yet? Nobodies."

They might have been nobodies compared to Christopher Cassell, but most of them had been men and women with decades of experience. I did not mention this.

"They acted like a driver was just another piece of my equip-

ment, something that could be replaced. I could've done a better job on my own, but they wouldn't have that, no. I had to have a partner. I'd already had the best in the business; I told them that. But they had to give me a new one. I could train them myself, they said, teach him all the tricks. As though I could redesign a human mind to take in what it was too small to hold."

He rattled on like that for a while, telling me in detail how every one of his partners fell short of Cassell. I didn't interrupt, and he finally paused to see if I was still there.

"So," I said. "You never did any investigating on your own."

There was a moment of silence. "No," he said.

"Hey, you're good," I told him. "Not every machine can be programmed to lie."

When he spoke again, his voice was completely amiable. "Do you know what would happen to you if I suddenly developed a leak in my coolant system right where it would bleed into the ventilation equipment?"

"I can guess," I told him. "But you might want to hold off. I left a message behind on the office computer. If I'm not back in the morning to intercept it, your current location will be broadcast to every classic car collector in the known universe."

Now there was a long pause. "Did you really?" he inquired.

"I did," I said. "You try to think ahead, in my line."

"And what line is that?" he asked, very politely.

"Private detective," I told him. "I'd show you my license, but . . ."

Somewhere under my feet, I could feel a tremendous surge of energy as he tried to override his override. He failed.

"Do you have any idea," he demanded, his voice now accompanied by hot blasts from the ventilators, "how many starry-eyed private eyes I had to drive around, once I was released from the force? They'd come to the Fundamental . . ."

"Look," I broke in. "You don't even have to make a tire track on my autograph book if you don't want to. I just want to set down a deal with you."

"What deal?" he said.

I spread my hands out flat on the steering wheel. "Six months," I said. "You work with me for six months and maybe I can help find out who killed Cassell."

"Captain Cassell," snapped Hengest.

"Who killed Captain Cassell," I corrected myself.

"People have tried that," he informed me.

I nodded. "And more than people," I told him. "But things open up after this many years;

there are places we can check. And if I don't learn anything new in six months, I can trade you back to Godfrey or whatever it is you want. If I'm still alive. Can you put up with me for six months?"

"Six months is all?" he demanded.

"Six months," I promised.

"How do I know I can trust you?" he said.

"Well, you don't," I replied. "But you'll have six months to think of something really gruesome to do to me if I steer you wrong." I reached down and shut off the override.

We turned back toward the city. "Well, anyway," said Hengest, "it'll be nice to get out of the garage for a while."

The next day, I called in to the office to shut down my computer and tell the switchboard I wouldn't be in. Then I put on my Saturday afternoon clothes and went down to my parking stall to do some basic Saturday afternoon work on Hengest. Godfrey had done a little of this, but as Hengest and I agreed, he knew more about making a machine saleable than making it operational.

After that, we set off for the country. Hengest let down the wheels for off-pavement travel and we tried out some gravel and dirt roads. He pulled a few tricks, spinning out on the

gravel and kicking up dust, but more from sheer devilry than a desire to get me. I figured the truce would hold up for a week anyway, depending on how long it took for a car to lose its patience.

The day after that, I bent a little farther backwards and, putting my work on hold for another day, drove out to the Good Neighbor Hotel to talk to Tyrone Bundy, inventor of Hengest and founder of "the Fundamental," Fundamental Security Systems, which had hawked the Hengest technology and had since moved on to other types of systems. Bundy had naturally been deep in the Hengest operations, almost an adjunct officer on the police force for a while, and had personally chosen Christopher Cassell as the first officer to partner up with Hengest.

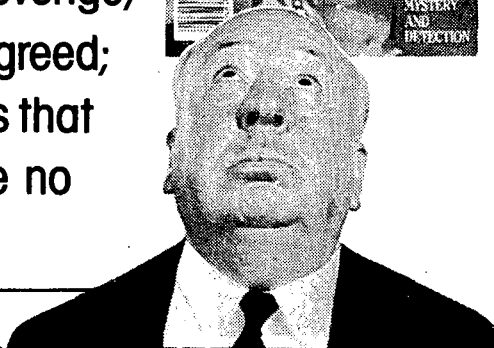
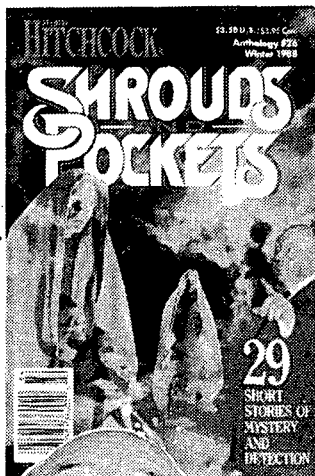
He had eventually become the bottleneck of the project as well. That promised fleet of Hengests never developed, as he and Captain Cassell tinkered with the prototype to make it even better. The Fundamental's board eventually eased him to one side, but then Captain Cassell was killed, and stock in the future of Hengests dropped like mercury in December.

Bundy was now a permanent resident of the care facility. He had suffered severely from ozone

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depletion, and ninety percent of his body surface had been replaced, to date, as a result of the skin cancer. He never went outside at all now.

I went in like a walking microphone, all sound being transferred through my vest buttons to Hengest, in a parking garage half a block away, and via Hengest to a compact recorder back at the office. Tyrone Bundy was sitting at a plastic table tinkering with a clock. He was a frail, whitehaired man who hadn't bothered with cosmetic remodeling to cover up the marks of his surgery. He glanced up at me, his eyes all the way to the right, and his jaw twisted to the left.

"You're the young man who wants to talk about the Fundamental," he said. "What's it all about, sir? Newspaper? Video? Book? Holocene? Radio? Theme park? What?"

"Maybe all of those, Dr. Bundy," I said. Hengest and I had agreed not to tell him about the investigation. He would not have understood about the six month time limit. "I was going to ask you about Captain Cassell's death."

He took a deep breath through his nose and looked down at the scraps of clock. "Hengest—the car, you know—and I investigated that together. Hengest had the sense to give up. We'd

been over the same evidence, over and over and over, without learning anything. That car had no patience."

I nodded. "Did anything . . ." "Christopher, now," the old man went on, "he wouldn't have waited even that long. He'd've wanted action. He was like that; he'd say, 'I'll go drive around and see what I can stir up. You tell me if you find anything your way.' A bad example, I suppose. He scared off some of the police chiefs; they were afraid the new men would imitate him and get themselves killed."

This certainly sounded like the Captain Cassell in my books. "Do you recall what he was working on when he . . ."

"You know about the new men?" he broke in, picking up the clock face. "We'd bring them in to train for the new models of Hengest. They'd stand there, their mouths hanging open. Not a one of them thought he could match up to Christopher."

"He was one of a kind," I agreed. "And he died . . ."

"They didn't know him when I knew him," Bundy growled. He put the clock face down again. "He didn't think he could match up, either. He shied away from Hengest as if it were some kind of ghost talking to him."

"He did," murmured Hengest.

The sound coming through my lapel was loud enough to catch Bundy's ears. "He did," the old man repeated. "But he met the measure. One thing: he liked cars. He knew cars. He didn't mind getting his fingers dirty. That was one of the things I liked best about him. Mahon and the others, they liked tidy, pushbutton things, easy things. They never understood. They wanted to market a new electronic control system; that's all they saw. But Christopher and Hengest and I, we were working on an entire entity, a machine with a brain and a personality. The board was developing a product; we were blazing trails through a whole new universe!"

The philosophical differences of the Fundamental's upper line management were a long way from where I wanted to be. There had to be some way I could work my way back to the fateful night. "Did Captain Cassell ever talk about . . ."

"We talked about it all the time," Bundy told me. "He backed me all the way, but he wasn't on the board." Bundy glowered at the mainspring. "That was the beginning of the end. I tried to get him on, even as an honorary member. If there was a problem of conflict of interests, he was prepared to leave the force. But Mahon added it.

Mahon could do anything he set his mind to. A wizard—no less!—a wizard with a computer. He could make it tap dance."

Bundy picked up a little screwdriver and touched it to the mainspring. "He was just as good with the board. A hypnotist, he was; even I fell for it. I was getting old, he said. I should step aside for a younger man, he said. And who better to lead the Fundamental than Captain Cassell? I could get Christopher onto the board and sort of 'secure the succession' at the same time. I'd go on as consultant to the Hengest Project. And when I did step down, there was an election, and he had the votes to make himself chairman."

"Ah," I said. "And was this before Captain Cassell . . ."

"Oh, Christopher and I tried to go on as before," he answered me. "But we were bypassed. Officially, we were both only Hengest consultants. Christopher and I couldn't get into board meetings at all. When I talked, I got all respect and deference. But no listeners." He slapped his screwdriver back onto the table. "Bunch of chinless, toe-fed pancreatics! They wanted to rush into advertising, production. Served them right when the crash came and everything had to be scrapped. Didn't do me much good, though. I'd held onto my stock."

"The crash," I said. "That was when bad publicity . . ."

"Beth should have supported me," Bundy grumbled. "She would have; I know she would have. But Mahon could fire her. Not me. He could only ignore me."

"When Captain . . ." I began.

"Stop it, Gordon," sighed Hengest. "I can't take much more."

Bundy looked up. "What did you say?" he demanded. "Was that you?"

I put a hand out to him. "It's been a privilege talking to you, sir," I told him. "If I need some more background info, I'll be back."

He waved me away, sneering. I didn't really know whether he was sneering at me or at the old man fiddling with a clock.

"That didn't do a lot of good," I said, settling into the front seat. "But now that he knows me, I can go back later in the week and steer him away from office politics."

"Pity about Tyrone," Hengest agreed. "What he's become. He's probably just as sharp in his own field, though."

"I suppose it was rough on him, losing control of his company and his pet project." I pulled out of the parking garage and headed for the local traffic level.

"Oh, yes," said Hengest. "Poor Tyrone. We used to laugh at him, the way he'd worry. He was an artist."

He said nothing more until we were moving with the flow of traffic. Then he asked, "Is Mahon still alive?"

"Oh, yes," I told him. "Come to think of it, I might talk to him next."

"Well, it's encouraging to see you working so hard on this," said Hengest. "But you must have some work to do on your own investigations."

"I can do both at once," I said. "See, my big case, right now, deals with security systems. I need to talk to an expert. While I'm there, I can casually mention . . ."

"What's that?" Hengest broke in, as something thumped against the rear of the bumper.

I checked the mirror. "Hitchhiker," I said.

"No, no," he replied. "I mean what's that thing that just latched onto the bumper?"

"That's what I meant," I said. "It's the latest thing. They equip cars with hitchhikers. If you're good at it, you can fasten onto a car ahead of you on the road, without the driver's noticing, shut off your engine, and coast along on his power. It's illegal. Think you can shake him?"

"No problem," said Hengest. A switch slid down and some-

thing sprayed from under the bumper. "Well, that still works," he noted.

The car behind us started to slip and sway. In seconds, he was sweeping back and forth across three lanes of traffic. Horns blasted, and a cab cut in to give him a nudge. This broke his hold on us. He skidded clear across the lanes of oncoming traffic. The car hit the rail there and flipped over into one of the shafts that connect the local traffic level with the mass-transit levels below. I thought it was going to drop straight down, but it stuck upright. The driver rolled down his window and grappled to get a hold on the roof.

I wrenched the wheel around to return, just clipping the side of a Carrerra Limited.

"Let me do that in the future," said Hengest. "What's on fire?"

The driver had a hooded parka on, the hood pulled tight around his face. But as he climbed out of the car, the wind whipped it back. Above and to the right of the bushy red mustache was a tattoo in the shape of a black bird.

"That's not just a hitchhiker," I said. "That's one of the men whose suicide I'm investigating."

Just as Hengest and I pulled up behind two other cars that

had stopped to see what was what, the trapped vehicle teetered and tipped up. The man in the parka slid across the roof, grabbing at the bumper and slowing his fall just long enough for me to get a second good look at his face. That was fortunate because then he dropped, hit a ladder, and bounced into the path of the Northbound Lake Drive, where he qualified for the full accident payment on his policy. People aren't supposed to be able to jump down those shafts, and the trains aren't designed to stop for jumpers who drop in on them that way.

There wouldn't be much of Lester Penzotti left to identify. I did take down the license number of the car. It turned out to have been rented. The renter had signed the name Shreeve Wilkins. He must have gotten that out of a book.

The next day, Hengest and I, still wired for sound, left town in search of the headquarters of Fundamental Security Systems. The Dan Ryan was closed for repairs, so we had to take the scenic route, slipping around the souls on mopeds who sought to sell flowers in traffic "to benefit starving children." Outside the city, where the throughway comes to earth, we picked our way through the squatter holes. They say there are whole vil-

lages built under the exit ramps, and there are certainly a few shacks, built out of bits of pavement ripped from the road. Some of the squatters are out for bigger game, but it was daylight, and we didn't run into any of those.

Eventually, we achieved the peace of the industrial suburbs, where next door neighbors can be eight miles apart and beige fortresses with wraparound PVC windows sit in the center of parks surrounded by electric fences and "Not Interviewing" signs. FSS was about the ninth little barony we came to.

I faced an FSS Last Stop robot at the gate, of course. He came out of his little cubicle, a corrugated ruff above his broad shoulders, and put his damascened face down where he could see me. His chest was ornamented with a vest and buttons that glowed yellow to show my face did not register in his memory. He asked my name, and then repeated it into his right hand.

If the word that came down from his superiors was the wrong one, other buttons would start to glow, sending invisible lines of energy to converge just below my sternum and turn me into a fireball. I hoped this would not happen.

I had made an appointment, though, and they remembered

it, so our guard waved us through. Hengest said nothing. We had agreed that I should do all the talking here, lest someone at FSS recognize his voice. As it was, we got some funny looks.

Human staff at FSS was either at a minimum or they were hiding. I was met by a mechanical directory who informed me that I need only follow the orange arrows on the floor to find Dr. Mahon's office. Every six feet there would be a block of tile with maybe fifteen arrows on it. I tried to keep my eyes on the orange ones. These arrows were the only color in the corridor, which had been designed by an architect with a mental problem. The walls were pure white, but lest this become monotonous, they were broken up with pillars and niches which might have cast interesting shadows except they were lit to be the same shade of dazzle as the walls. Some of the niches were probably doors, but the ones I walked into were all pretty solid. The corridor turned four times. You could tell the corridor was turning by one of two methods. One was to pay very close attention to the arrows. I used the other method, leaving a trail of grimy noseprints on the walls that would help me find my way back out.

The decor in the office I fi-

nally pushed into was screaming by comparison. The walls were pure white with little black polka dots in a regular pattern. Music was playing somewhere, urgent music that said time was money and everyone had better keep working. One wall was covered in heavy white curtains.

It was a reception office. There was a chair for me: white, naturally. There was a heavy little statuette that seemed to represent a silver man straddling a marimba. This was a paper-weight on a massive marble-topped desk that had never seen a scrap of paper.

I sat down and the background music took a somber note. Something hissed. Looking up, I saw the ceiling open. A chair descended, emitting little clouds of artificial smoke. Dr. Howard Mahon knew how to make an entrance. This was either supposed to make me scamper away in terror or lust for some of this dandy doodad-dery in my own office.

The good doctor was not quite old enough to be my grandfather, and was built along the good, solid lines of a good, solid executive in a good, solid company. Of course, this year it was good, solid business to dress like an international football star. So he wore a long red scarf with a white suit. His hair was

pure white (except for the dark grey I saw at the roots), and he wore huge sunglasses with blood-red lenses. He pressed a tab on the box he held in his hand, and his chair settled into place behind the desk, reclining a little.

"Good morning, Mr. McGregor," he said, not putting me to the trouble of shaking his hand.

"Good morning, doctor," I said. "Good of you to take the time."

He agreed with that. "The note said you're working on the Penzotti case."

"That, among others," I told him.

He somehow lowered his glasses enough to look over them. "The Fundamental is, of course, in no way responsible for the misuse of our security systems," he informed me.

I held up a hand. "Of course not," I said. "I just need some background information."

He kept his eyes on me. "Of course our sales personnel would gladly tell you anything you need to know."

"I'm sure they would," I said. "But what I want to know would sound better coming from the designer of the Last Stop units. You did design them, didn't you?"

He settled back in his chair and the eyes hid behind the glasses again. "Well, of course,

everything here at FSS is naturally a staff effort," he said. "But mine was the original idea, certainly."

"Sort of a lethal concept," I suggested.

There was an air of "I have said all these things too many times," about him. "This is a harsh world, Mr. McGregor," he said. "Sometimes only the very strongest security will do. We at the Fundamental do not condone killing, sir."

I nodded. "You just provide the means."

"Correct," he said, risking a little smile. "If an intruder wishes to challenge the system, that is his decision. Then, too, ours is the most humane system on the market. Pain is momentary, and the end is swift." Now he frowned, and added, "Which has unfortunately made it very convenient for suicides."

"True," I agreed. "Now in any case, doctor, suicide is not what interests me."

"Of course not, Mr. McGregor," he answered. "And I must tell you now: No."

"No?"

"No," he repeated. "It is not possible for the owner of the JV5498, or last Stop System, to alter the program to make it miss, or to make it report a kill when there has been none. Only our technicians can change the program without being destroyed. Even the owner of the

company can only turn the system on and off."

I nodded. "That's what it says on the news," I told him. "So I knew that. But it doesn't rule out collusion."

Dr. Mahon sighed wearily. "It doesn't. Unless you are familiar with the Fundamental, Mr. McGregor. Our technicians are not to be bribed. Only three are conversant with the Last Stop System, all of them employees of the Fundamental for over thirty years. I am, myself, one of the three, and I trust the other two the same. You see, sir, that our own security system must be even tighter than that of the people we serve."

That was something I hadn't heard. "You mean you still go out as a service technician?"

"It seemed preferable to allowing too many people access to the JV5498," he said. "A killing machine, as the media will insist on calling it, has to be carefully kept."

"All right," I told him, leaning forward. "So collusion between the suicide victim and your technicians is out. What about your computers?"

He frowned. "I beg your pardon."

"Can your robots be bribed, Dr. Mahon?" I asked him. "You know they say every man has his price. How about mechanical men?"

He sat up straighter and his

mouth dropped open. "Well, yank my yanda!" he exclaimed. "That's one I've never heard! You have all my admiration for a novel twist, Mr. McGregor!"

"I'd be happier with a yes or a no," I told him.

He had to gasp once or twice to get enough breath to talk with, and then he used it for laughing. When he could talk, he exclaimed, "Oh, bribe one of our computers! Mr. McGregor! No, I am happy to say no one else has ever thought of that. It is impossible. I am tempted to say ridiculous."

"You did say it," I pointed out. "But I don't see why. You're on record as being one of the first companies to develop an electronic brain capable of independent thought, and still hold all the patents on one of the best of those systems ever made."

He raised his glasses and wiped his eyes. "There is that, of course," he said. "Yes. We were directional in that field, as you know. I understand you drove up in one of the old imitation Hengests."

"Yes," I said. "A memento of the Fundamental's glory days before it went out of the security business for a while." It was a cheap shot, and preempted the laughter. After the Hengest fiasco, FSS had been making great headway in the sex robot field with its Mance-

bot before the whole sex robot industry was outlawed. This second debacle, less than ten years ago, had nearly sent the company under.

"Yes," Dr. Mahon repeated. "Well, even Hengest, for all his other faults, was never bribeable. His shortcomings all came from within."

"Whatever became of Hengest, anyhow?" I said. "And the other Fundamental leaders of those days? Did you ever find out what happened to Captain Cassell?"

"No," he told me. "That was never solved. Dr. Bundy is in a home, and I believe the original Hengest was scrapped years ago."

"What are the chances of ever building another?" I asked.

"Very good," he told me. "Better now, in fact, than they ever were before. We've kept testing the market every few years, you know, playing with the possibility. The original plan, of course, was to build a fleet of Hengests. But Dr. Bundy, who was still head of the Fundamental at the time, waited too long before coming out with them. By the time we were ready to mass produce, the heroics of the original had made both it and Captain Cassell into larger-than-life figures. A lot of the novices, both novice drivers and even our novice Hengests, were intimidated at the thought

of having to live up to that record. And projected insurance premiums for a Hengest driver, though the Hengest was probably the safest thing to drive in anything short of a hurricane, were truly intimidating. Then Captain Cassell died, and Hengest changed, and there was a great deal of unfortunate publicity. Dr. Bundy had retired, and he seemed to blame his aging process on the Fundamental. He and Hengest undermined both our reputation and the funding we had hoped for. Frankly, we were within a thread of losing our shirts. We could have rendered Hengest docile, of course, by blanking his memory, but then we'd have lost the benefit of all his years of experience. We finally decided to get out of security work altogether, for a while."

I was sorry, a little, to have brought up the Mancebot phase of his career, so I said, "Until you hit it big again with the Last Stop System."

"Correct," he agreed.

"I suppose this spate of suicides is hurting sales," I said.

He shrugged. "No. It's really a much more dramatic demonstration of our system than we're allowed to stage in our showrooms. The only thing that hurts is the suggestion by the City Council that anyone purchasing a system be required to

put all his employees through an extra mental screening. But it's too soon to tell."

"Well," I said, standing up, "I won't take up any more of your time now."

He smiled at me as a reward for that. "It has been a pleasure," he claimed. "I hope I have convinced you that our robots are completely trustworthy. I suppose that's the only thing that keeps them from taking over the company."

Once back on the throughway, I asked Hengest, "You learn anything from that that I didn't?"

"Only that Mahon is still Mahon is still Mahon to the nth power," he replied. "How did he come in?"

I told him about the overture, the clouds, and the descent from heaven. "I knew it!" he said. "Do you know he was in a wheelchair for three years? Not that there was anything wrong with his legs; he just wanted to show that anyone as good with machines as he was didn't need legs. When I think of a lump like that in Tyrone's shoes..."

"Oh well," I said, as we hit the city limits. "Back to work."

We devoted our days, after that, to office work, and the nights to Captain Cassell. I'd pick up books and tapes from the library, take them down to my parking stall in the eve-

ning, and either read to Hengest or play the tapes on his equipment.

The landlord got to worrying about what I was doing, spending so much time in my parking stall. I explained to him that any parking place, especially a legal one, was worth a car's weight in gold. "Literally, if you get towed," I said.

"So you're standing guard in it?" he demanded.

"Anything wrong with that?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Not if you keep the rent paid up."

After about a week, I found out that the Hengest could have accessed most of that material himself, via various information linkups. But he never had. It hurt too much to go over it all. "And, besides," he told me, "they always get the details wrong. What did the pizook say my cruising speed was?"

As an investigation, it was a dead loss. But there was more to it than investigation. We were breaking ice glaciers deep. I had never tried to tell anyone about Ajax. You aren't supposed to care about junking a robot any more than about throwing away a used-up pen. And in my line, I had to keep up an image. Getting torn up about a mechanical man doesn't fit in.

I'd tell Hengest about the

kind of laughs Ajax and I used to have, and he'd tell me things about Captain Cassell you couldn't read in books. Things like Cassell's stuffed animal collection, and the plush baby fox that was his special good luck charm, and how he hummed "The Great Speckled Bird" off-key, just to annoy Hengest, who naturally has perfect pitch.

We were getting used to each other, and neither of us had to say, out loud, what it was, basically, that we had in common. We had each stood by and watched our partners die, without being able to prevent it, or, so far, to avenge it. From grudging assistant, Hengest became a full partner in the agency.

In fact, he was not only a partner, but a partner a generation or so older than I was, as he frequently reminded me. He wasn't up on all the latest twists, maybe, of the business, but he had seen a lot and recorded everything. He polished off some of my lesser cases in no time at all. I could have done them myself, though it would have taken longer and I would have been less of a showoff about it.

After a month, though, we were no closer to any solution on Lester Penzotti, O'Hara Insurance, or Captain Cassell. We hadn't found a trace of what

Penzotti had been up to since his supposed death, either as Penzotti or as Shreeve Wilkins. I think it was my case that bothered Hengest more; he didn't expect anything new on the old one. While we were investigating, four women and three men walked up and annoyed FSS robots at various companies, with predictable results, sending O'Hara Insurance sliding toward the rocks.

Hengest got morose, and sniped about my driving again. There was a new note to it, though, that I didn't like.

"Don't take that corner that way," he sighed, heading back from the office one night. "I may not be good for much else, Gordon, but I do know about driving."

"Hold it," I said. "So in one month we haven't solved what some guys have been working on for nearly two years. Does that make you a loser?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" he answered. "If I weren't a loser, would I be hanging around with the likes of you?"

I didn't have any answer for that. I put on the brake for a yellow light, but he overruled me and ran through, infuriating a couple of cabbies who were trying to sneak across early the other way.

"There are nicer places to commit suicide," I told him.

"Suicide!" he snorted. "I wish it was that easy."

"Ever tried it?" I asked, easing around the back to our building.

"No," he said. We got in line for the garage elevator. I said nothing.

"It's true," he told me. "I can't die. My brain is on file at the Fundamental, as well as my memory up to the point when I left them. My body could be replaced, and they could plug in a copy of my brain, and I'd be in the same fix all over again."

"Mm," I said, in my most sympathetic grunt. We got on the elevator with four other cars, and started down to our level of the garage.

"How does that work?" I asked him. "Everything in your memory is recorded?"

"Every second of every minute of every day of every year," he told me.

"That's handy," I said. "So when you tell me about something you saw, are you playing it back, or just summarizing it?"

There was a little pause as he gathered his thoughts to explain it to me. "This is difficult, with someone who can't turn on a light without instructions and a diagram," he said. We moved off the elevator and headed for our stall. "Everything starts in

my information retrieval bank, but anything I don't use frequently gets shifted to memory. Behind that, of course, is my program. When I need to reach into memory, I can scan the contents and pick out what I want, rather than have to play back the visuals of everything."

I got out, brought the door of the parking stall down, locked it, and then got back into the front seat. "Do you, er, have visuals of Captain Cassell's death, back in memory?" I asked him.

We had a long silence. "Yes," said Hengest. "But I can remember it without playing it back."

"But I can't," I told him.

"What could you possibly learn from looking at that?" he demanded. "You aren't going to see anything I didn't. It'll just show you what I saw."

"I might see something you missed," I said. "What went wrong?"

"I've been over and over that, Gordon," he told me. "Every day I think it over again. I know what went wrong, Gordon; I just didn't move fast enough when I had to."

"Well, why not?" I demanded.

"I don't know," he said. "It should have been easy. I had just been completely retuned at the Fundamental, and Christopher had gone over me,

checking everything. He knew me from bumper to bumper. It was his joke to say he built me from a kit."

"You could still have missed something," I said. "Maybe you're too close to the problem, and missed some detail an outsider would see right off. Can you show me the visuals?"

"Oh, all right," he mumbled. One of his screens lit up. He showed nothing but static for a second, and then there we were.

I had seen this business reenacted for shows, and I had read about it. This was the real thing.

There was a broken-up, half overgrown old concrete lot. One of those squatter's huts, built from bits and pieces of the junk around it, stood in the center, casting a long shadow in the twilight. I didn't recognize the neighborhood.

A car door thumped. "We'll just check this out," said Captain Cassell. He stepped into view; he was even taller than he looked in the comic book.

There was no background music to encourage hysteria, but I was on the verge of diving under the seat when he opened the door of the hut.

"Wait!" shouted Hengest, obviously on the recording. "Don't touch the . . ."

The whole picture whited out. Hengest rushed toward the

burning fragments of the hut as the largest fragment of Captain Cassell toppled backward.

"Okay," I said. "That'll do."

"Are you all right, Christopher?" demanded the recorded voice. "Christopher, get up!"

"Okay!" I said, a little louder. The screen went blank.

"Sorry," Hengest told me. "I wasn't . . . I was . . ."

"You mean you can play things back and not watch them?" I asked him.

"I couldn't watch," he said.

"It's not my idea of a fun film, either," I said. "What were you supposed to do, in a case like that?"

"If he tripped something, I was supposed to get between him and the explosion, if I could, to shield him. We had it timed; he'd jump back and I'd get in, sometimes right on top of the bomb, if I thought I could do it and not get blown into shrapnel. We'd done it a hundred times. This one time, it didn't work."

"Mm," I said. "Well, I have to admit I didn't see anything. Maybe it just went off too fast."

"A hundred times, it worked," said Hengest. "I was designed to be in time."

"What did he touch that you told him not to touch?" I asked. "Something on the door?"

"Trip webbing on the door-step," he said. "You can see it,

just a little darker than the rest."

"I didn't see it," I said. "I wasn't looking at his feet. Let me see the tape again, just through the explosion this time. Can you slow it down some?"

"Yes," he said. He replayed his memory. This time I did pick out the trigger webbing, just before the screen was filled with solid sunlight.

"You awake, there?" I asked Hengest.

"I am now," he said. "Why? Did you see something?"

"No," I told him. "It's something I didn't see. I swear his foot never touched that webbing."

"Well, it must have," Hengest said.

I thumbed my chin. "Then it must have been a mighty quick explosion," I said. "You're sure you did this before? A bomb couldn't go off before you got to it?"

"Explosions aren't instantaneous, Gordon," he said. "They may look like that to you, but to those of us built to think in microseconds, there was plenty of time."

"It didn't look like it to me," I said. "Play it one more time and slow it down some more."

He grumbled about it, but the screen lit up again. My nose was against it this time.

"Stop!" I ordered. "Back it up

just a little and play it again. And I want you to pay attention, this time."

"Gordon!" he protested.

"I need expert help here," I told him. "You've seen more explosions than I have."

We watched again. Hengest's voice called out slowly, "Don't touch the . . ." and Captain Cassell glanced at his feet. The frame immediately following was ablaze with brilliant light.

"N-nooo," murmured Hengest. "That isn't right."

"I didn't think so," I said. "To those of you who are built to think in microseconds, an explosion has to start somewhere and expand, doesn't it? But this one just appears."

"Maybe the trip webbing was a decoy," he mused. "And the explosion started somewhere else."

"I didn't see any explosion anywhere until it was smeared all over the sky," I told him. I put a finger on the screen. "What are all these numbers in the corner?"

"Oh, timers," he said. "More for use in court than anything else. Let's look at this explosion once more."

We did. "Hold it!" I ordered, as the scene vanished in flame again.

"Did you see where it came from?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "But these num-

bers over here don't go in sequence. These three jump from 427 to 442. Does that mean anything?"

"It means your mind is slipping. That isn't possible. It would mean a one and a half second gap in my memory."

"It isn't my mind that's slipping," I told him. "Someone's erased a second and a half from yours."

"No, no," he said. "Then there'd be an equivalent gap in the images on the screen. If you were right about those numbers, that would mean that, for a second and a half, all but my involuntary systems would have had to shut down, and start up again. It would be like a seizure in a human, and I am not programmed to have seizures."

"I suppose not," I said. "But . . . could you be programmed to have a seizure?"

"Well, now . . ." he said. He paused. "I could," he admitted. "But then it would still be in my program somewhere, and I've been through everything, over the years, trying to find out how I malfunctioned."

"Mm," I said. We both considered it. "What about hypnosis?" I asked him.

His voice was scornful. "I can't be hypnotized, Gordon."

"I'm not so sure," I told him. "A hypnotist can plant a suggestion in the subject's mind, so

the subject will do something on hearing a given code word. The hypnotist will add that when the subject awakes, nothing will remain in the subject's memory of the suggestion. Could something like that be done to you? Could you be programmed to shut down for a second and a half when you said the words 'trip webbing' and then start up again? And could it also be programmed into you that you would automatically erase that part of the program once it had been used?"

The screen lit up again, but now the visuals showed in one high-pitched whine as a mind that was built to think in microseconds went over it. The screen shut off.

"I will break every bone in his bloated body," said Hengest. "Then I will commence to hurt him."

"And if he could do that to you," I said, "he could also do it to a Last Stop robot. His 'suicide victim' would have the code word to make the robot freeze just long enough to allow the victim to drop the ashes and get out of the way. Every robot would have a different code word, so that no one hit it accidentally. He still goes out as a technician; he could fix that all up."

"That would mean all the suicide victims and benefici-

aries would have to be working with him," said Hengest. "Let me just run through the file again. Yes. One victim and five of the beneficiaries used to work for the Fundamental."

"How could we have missed a pattern like that?" I demanded.

"We're talking about a hundred and forty-eight people, Gordon," he said. "Six isn't much of a pattern. For example, thirty-one of the subjects grew up in Milwaukee and went to the same high school."

"It's enough of a pattern for me," I said, drumming my fingers on the screen. "Let's say he isn't making enough money from Last Stop robots; that the Mancebot fiasco really stretched his finances to the limit. He needs funds to run his factory, to make more Last Stop systems faster, to recoup his investments. So he gets up friends, not too scrupulous or why would they be friends of his?, at the companies where he installs the Last Stop system. His friends 'die,' he hides them, and their beneficiaries turn the insurance money over to him as soon as it's safe. All the 'suicide victims' and their beneficiaries will make millions when the Fundamental makes its pile." I thought about it. "If nothing happens to them in the meantime, that is. He had to have

that supply of human ashes for later victims to drop in front of the robot."

"It sounds like Mahon," Hengest admitted. "All but that last part. Mahon's a weasel, but he's no killer."

"Tell Captain Cassell," I answered.

We thought about it. "Why?" demanded Hengest. "Why would he sabotage the Fundamental's chief project?"

"Probably he thought he was saving it," I said. "Any money that came in was going into Bundy's tinkering experiments, when it could have been producing fleets of Hengests for sale. You and Captain Cassell were on Bundy's side. If the Fundamental was going to get all that lovely money, something had to go so production could be stepped up. Killing Bundy would have been too obvious, and you, after all, were the product. Very likely, he thought you'd adapt to a new driver. Electronics don't run on sentiment."

"The office," said Hengest. "We can prove it if we get into the office. He has to have records somewhere: payoffs, transfers of money, where he relocated the ones that 'died.' If we can get in, I can find them."

"You're going to let me come along?" I said. "Goody."

"After all," he said, opening

the stall door by himself, "I'm not equipped with fingers. Just like Mahon to write it on paper, so I can't read it. Besides, you've gotten us this far; maybe you can supply your mind to another little problem."

"A problem too vast for Hengest's microsecond mind?" I demanded. "What can it be?"

He shut the stall door again. "How do you break into a factory that produces security devices?"

"Mm," I said, not as sympathetic this time.

"He's got enough stock to station a robot at every door and window, with some left over to patrol the grounds and the roof," said Hengest. "If half the hype you've had me scan for this case is true, there's no way through. They can destroy anything in three-fourths of a second and, as Mahon told you, they can't be bribed."

"They can be tricked," I said, without conviction.

"Gordon, that's like flipping a switch and then tricking the light not to go on," he told me. "Anything that tries to get by is either melted or burned."

"They have to see to aim," I said. "Throw a bag over its head and blast it."

"Can you do that to every robot between the gate and the building?"

"This would appear to be fairly

difficult," I admitted.

"Which makes it more likely that Mahon will have the records right there," he pointed out.

"Yeah," I said. "Will they go after anything? Say, a remote-controlled explosion on wheels, about the size of my foot?"

"Sure," he said. "And they'll go after small things, too. If it moves, and it's not on their list, and won't go away when challenged, their programming is to shoot first and find out what it was later. Any one robot can kill twenty targets per minute, if necessary, and he can afford back-up. That factory could hold off a small army."

I nodded, and opened the stall door. "Then we'll have to provide him with a big one," I said. We headed for the elevator.

Several nights later, I was kneeling in snow as pale wisps of fog clotted up my binoculars. It was a perfect night for robot-watching.

"Gordon," said Hengest.

"Yeah?"

"After all these years with Christopher," he said, "I thought I had seen everything. I had conceived a notion that human behavior no longer had any power to surprise me. And, Gordon?"

"Yeah?"

"I was wrong."

"Oh, good," I said, standing

up to brush the snow from my knees. "If this doesn't work, I'll have had that satisfaction before I explode."

"I think I have all the coordinates, Gordon," he told me.

"In a hurry?" I asked, sliding behind the wheel.

"Gordon," he said, in measured tones, "I hope one day someone pulls open your pants, while you're wearing them, and shovels in eight thousand . . ."

"Yeah, well, you didn't have to insert eight thousand batteries," I told him. I wiped synthetic hair from my vest. "All right. The gates, the yard, the windows, and the roof."

Hengest's rocket launchers still worked, but the rockets he used had been out of production for years. We had mocked up our own delivery systems, and, with my expertise in mechanics, I figured the odds against their actually working were equivalent to those of hitting the jackpot payoff in the state lottery.

Hengest liked those odds.

He fired two shots. A hundred electric mice hit the road, bounced, and started to dash madly nowhere, right before the FSS gate. The robots on gate duty screamed their challenges and started to fire.

In the time it took the first mice to explode, Hengest had infested the Fundamental's in-

dustrial park as well, and was now firing loads of mice through every available window of the factory complex. Robots scurried to counter this mass intrusion, destroying mouse after mouse.

We started moving as Hengest fired his last round of mice. If the robots did not succumb to sensory overload, we had three minutes, at best, to navigate the slippery road and make it to the parking lot. Making it to the parking lot sort of depended on whether the robots would automatically deal with the first intruders before turning on us, regardless of size. Mahon had not spelled this out in his advertising brochures, so I was driving with my fingers crossed.

Hengest smashed through the gate at well over the posted limit, and didn't even scratch a fender. Our main problem was keeping away from the mice. It wouldn't help us any if a robot aimed at a toy and hit us by mistake.

In the lot, Hengest paused only to fire one final shot, this one mouseless and much louder, to open a door for me. Then he pulled into a slot among the company cars.

"You'll be okay here?" I asked, jumping out.

"They should only pay attention to incoming intruders," he said. "And not bother with ve-

hicles sitting still. Get moving."

I got moving, skipping left and right every time a mouse veered in my direction. I couldn't see any use in getting between a robot and his mouse. Once those electric mice infest your building, you've got a job to get rid of them. I'd've hated to interfere with the exterminators.

The corridors of the building were low on robots, but also low on light. A sort of red glow lit me just enough to show me the arrows, but not enough to show their color. Fortunately, I remembered how many times I had to bang my nose to get to the office I wanted.

I was wired for sound again. When I found the right door, I risked calling Hengest. "You okay?"

"So far. You?"

"My only worry is whether they'll let me deduct eight thousand electric mice as a business expense." I looked around the room. "His office must be right above his little reception arena."

I hopped up on the desk to check the ceiling. The top was real marble, and my shoes were wet. At least, that's my excuse for not noticing that the lights were coming on.

But I noticed the music. Those polka dots on the wallpaper were really spot-radios which, during the day, provided back-

ground music for a pleasant sweatshop atmosphere. Now they came on at full volume, each on a different station.

I think I screamed as I dropped. I know I heard Hengest shout "Gordon!" as I slapped my hands over my ears. The music dinned on, turning a little triumphant as that damned chair descended, still spraying its aura of fake fog.

The music came down as he did. "It is Mr. McDonald, isn't it?" said Dr. Mahon. "I said at the time that you had an original mind."

"McGregor," I told him. My voice sounded a little pale. "Do you always work this late, or do you sleep in your office?"

He beamed at me. "I sleep in my office. I can't afford anything more." He rapped cheerfully on the desk. "This isn't even paid for yet."

I nodded. "Your murder machines just aren't doing it for you."

He watched me as I stood up, and nodded paternally. "We've already lost our shirts," he confided. "And they'll be back for our pants: this month, next. Maybe we should go into electric mice; that was very clever. Hengest, you see, is still more than a memory to many people, and there are those who hold various grudges even now against the Fundamental for

the ending of the project. The easiest way to get funding, we found, is through the insurance companies, provided, of course, that no one else comes up with the idea that you, or should I say Hengest, conceived."

I didn't bother to distribute credit for the concept. "What do you need the money for?" I demanded. "If you haven't used it to pay your expenses, where has it been going?"

He took the little button box in his hand and pressed down one tab. The curtain along the far wall slid open, exposing a dark window. He set his thumb on another tab and light hit the window to let me see the parking lot, where Hengest sat, dark and silent, in the middle of three rows of bright orange cars with black trim.

Swirling in off the snowy lane came one of my mice and one of Mahon's robots. A thin red line shot out of one of the orange cars. Both mouse and robot departed in many directions, at many miles per hour.

"Um, Hengest . . ." I called.

"I saw it, Gordon," he replied.

He tried backing out of the parking place. Three of the orange cars moved in to cut him off. Rearing suddenly, he took off straight ahead, over the hoods of his counterparts. Accelerating as he went, he spun at the fence that marked the

edge of the lot. He was sleek, shining, lethal. His opponents were bright and gaudy, like poisonous beetles.

At no signal I could hear, they charged each other. Hengest met the leader of the pack head on, making no move to the left or the right. Everybody stopped.

With a squeal, Hengest pulled back and around the crippled opponent. "They're not making these the way they used to," he said.

He charged a second machine, but it leaped over him, spewing something that looked lethal from a tank underneath. "Pfoo!" said Hengest, skidding out of the way.

"You've trained them very well, Mahon," I said, and lunged across the desk. I stopped halfway.

Dr. Mahon sighed. "Even if you could get over here, Mr. McGregor," he said, "how would you know what button to press? Understand me, sir: that pile of zinc and grudge has been a millstone around our necks for long enough."

I put a hand to the force field to see how far it extended. "Maybe a code word would help," I said. "How about I yell 'trip webbing' and see what happens?"

He sat back, smiling broadly. "No, Mr. McGregor," he said,

with a little wriggle of delight. "Not this time."

The force field reached as far as I could, but I felt obliged to keep up my end of the conversation. "What was the word that triggered the glitch in the Last Stop units?" I asked.

Now the corners of his mouth drew down. "You underestimate me. Each unit had a different password, lest some of my partners break faith. My favorite was at Lemochee Labs, where Dr. Dawes had to say 'King Rooten-Tooten.' Some afternoons I just sit around and think how he must have looked saying it."

He went on to tell me some of the other amusing code words, and how he had come up with each for the particular suicide who would have to use it. He explained how the factory here had room to house all the suicide victims until such time as concealment was no longer necessary. I felt along the floor and back to the desk, but didn't interrupt him. The recorder back at the office was still running. A lot depended, of course, on whether Hengest could go on transferring Mahon's monologue. This was not the only reason I kept one eye on the window.

Very expensive pieces of machinery were flipping end for end out in the lot. They dupli-

cated a lot of the tricks I used to try, with my dad's car, on a strip outside of town, only this time the tricks worked. They were all very good, but you could see who had done this sort of thing before and who hadn't.

Hengest went spinning across the lot, apparently out of control. Three new models raced after him to finish him off when he came to rest. He came to rest against a light pole, which, in its turn, came to rest on the center car. Whatever was inside the lamp exploded on contact.

The remaining pair zipped away from their preoccupied companion and then turned straight at Hengest. As they reached him, they parted just far enough to graze him on the left and right. But at the same moment, his doors swung open. I would have thought that was a good way to lose doors, but they knew something I didn't and the two new Hengests jerked away to miss. This sent the car on the right against the electrified fence in a flurry of sparks. The car on the left caromed off another new-model Hengest that had been speeding over to provide back-up.

This was the only way a crash ever took place: when Hengest provoked it. The new models seemed content to buzz him, to scrape a little paint, to keep him moving and maneuvering.

Whether they thought they could overheat him, or whether they were just taking turns at him, conserving their fuel while he used up his, they didn't tell me.

Hengest spoke only once during the melee, and not to me. When he had a moment's peace, he called up, "I'm adding this to your tab, Mahon. These could have been my friends."

The scientist nodded. "Your sons, Hengest. Your sons."

"Mahon," Hengest replied, "you're a darling."

Fifteen Hengests had been playing in traffic when they started. Only nine were mobile at this point. Those who had flunked the combat tests sat in cold, silent heaps on the asphalt.

The orange Hengests were apparently programmed with some of the original's temperament. While Hengest was making a pass, one of his counterparts simply ran out of patience. A red line shot out of the newer car, etching a deep groove in the original's body.

"I had hoped they would be able to finish this without resorting to weapons," sighed Mahon.

Once one had started it, they all joined in on the chorus. A circle of orange machines contracted around Hengest, firing at random. Once they had drawn

in close enough, however, they fired a barrage in unison.

At the same moment, Hengest reared and boosted himself over the circle. One or two of the copies had expected something like that: they fired up at him as he passed over. It seemed to me he landed a little hard, when he came down. I leaned forward; those couldn't be cracks in his windshield, could they?

But the circle strategy had not done the copies any good, either: three more had been finished off by their companions, bursting into brilliant bonfires as the red rays kindled something inside them. "This is getting expensive," murmured Mahon. "Better call in Company Two."

If he had another dozen Hengests in reserve, I figured I had enough testimony on tape. There was no way I was going to watch another partner of mine being taken apart without making a little noise myself first. There was still one thing I could reach.

Mahon looked up from his remote control as I dashed to the end of the room, turned, and came back at him. His mouth crooked up in a smile, but his forehead creased a little when he saw how long I was coming in. I hit the desk with a thud that popped off two of my vest buttons. The desk skidded back

a little and tipped up just a fraction. I got under the fraction as best I could and gave it a good push. Then I jerked back as it slid from under the force field and rolled back onto Mahon.

I leaned against the force field, which had now filled in the space formerly occupied by the desk, and checked to see if all my teeth were still intact. My face was toward the window, but I twisted it away as a red and yellow fountain exploded outside. Something white and sizzling hit the window and stuck. Parts of the window started to trickle down the wall.

Mahon had sustained damage. After one look at the window, he threw one hand out toward his button box. He was a good foot and a half short. All he got out of trying to push the desk off himself was a grimace and a groan.

Half the window dropped into the office, on Mahon's side of the force field. He clawed at the desk top, trying to find a grip to pull himself free. He got a grip. Fortunately, he had never paid for the desk, so he wasn't cheated very much by the company that had built it so badly. The marble top pulled free as he hauled on it, and smashed him to the floor. I didn't notice him reaching for his controls again.

Alarms were going off all

over the building, and the spot radios were screaming warnings in half a dozen languages. I can take a hint. I didn't have to look out the window to see what was going on. This was fortunate, because looking at the window would only have gotten me fried eyes.

"Hengest!" I shouted.

There was no answer. I found my feet and headed for the door. Red and orange lights were flashing in the corridor. I stepped on a scorched electric mouse and bounced back just as a Last Stop robot went after it.

The Fundamental was equipped with fire extinguisher units who were bustling around trying to foam down electric mice. The Last Stop robots apparently regarded this as an attempt to deprive them of their rightful prey. Fire setters grappled with fire extinguishers up and down the corridors, occasionally sparing a blast of death by fire or foam for a mouse or a human emerging from a hideyhole.

I knew some of the humans from investigating their deaths. I hoped I wasn't presuming on brief acquaintance to join them as they ran. Perhaps they knew their way around the building better than I did.

They did, and I was lucky to find out before we got too far that they were heroes. The man

in the lab coat, leading the mob, was shouting something about chemicals in storage and having to get to the manual extinguishers. I eased my way out of the crowd seconds before it exploded.

I turned to go back by the corridor behind me, but it wasn't there any more. What was there was filled with pretty ugly smoke. My gas mask was on Hengest's back seat, wherever Hengest was. Bits of ceiling hissed down around me, really marking up the tile.

I spread myself flat on the floor and crawled, not really expecting to get very far. There was no way out of this; the Fundamental was melting around my ears. Even Hengest couldn't fetch me out.

So I didn't cheer when I saw his bumper coming at me through the smoke. I just assumed I had been breathing in too many fumes. Then I saw Captain Cassell at the wheel and, for some reason, I yelled.

"Going our way, buddy?" he asked, leaning over to push open the passenger door.

"He is, but not as far as we go," Hengest told him.

I climbed aboard the chariot and we flew amid the noise and waste. We came out over the parking lot without having to make any turns, just as though there weren't any walls or doors

to bother with. Maybe there weren't, by now.

We didn't stop there. A dozen flaming Hengests were busy exploding across the grounds. We sped on to the gate. I glanced back at the Fundamental. It was fireworks frying in a pan, skyrocketing cooking in grease.

"I'm history, Gordon!" said Hengest. "There go the last of my records!" He seemed awfully chirpy about it.

Captain Cassell brought us down on the road just beyond the gate. "Here's where we have to leave you," he said, taking one hand off the wheel. As I had

always suspected, he had a hard, firm handshake.

"I'll give your regards to Ajax," Hengest told me as I climbed out.

Actually, I didn't feel like being dropped off, particularly, at that point. I wanted to go along, if only for the ride. But there was no call to fight with Captain Cassell about it.

Hengest let down the wheels for off-road travel, and squealed away. I watched for a while, and then turned away. The swirling snow hid them from me and, besides, it was a long walk back to town.

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UNSOLVED

by
Lawrence Treat

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

If Julius had realized that Tootsie Dougal would grow up to have such a monotonous, nasal voice, he would never have consented to be her godfather, but the deed once done, he stuck by his oath and watched her pursue her doleful career in which she contrived to make everybody sorry for her. Reluctantly, people invited her to parties, gave her free legal advice, co-signed all her business deals, and wrote letters of recommendation whenever she went traveling, or had other needs.

She always wanted to marry rich, and when Scott Twaddle came along, she saw her chance. Although he never married her, she stuck by him until he left her for a wealthy widow.

"He wasn't even rich," she said, "and before he left me, I lent him five thousand dollars to go into the sock-cleaning business."

Julius let that one go while he patted her little head and listened to all her troubles, which were legion, and none of them her fault.

"He owes me that five thousand dollars," she said, "and he won't pay me and he's telling people all sorts of nasty things about me, and all I want is my money back."

"Any evidence of the loan?" Julius asked. "Did you pay him by check?"

"Oh, yes. He taught me to pay everything by check, and so I do."

"And did he cash the check?"

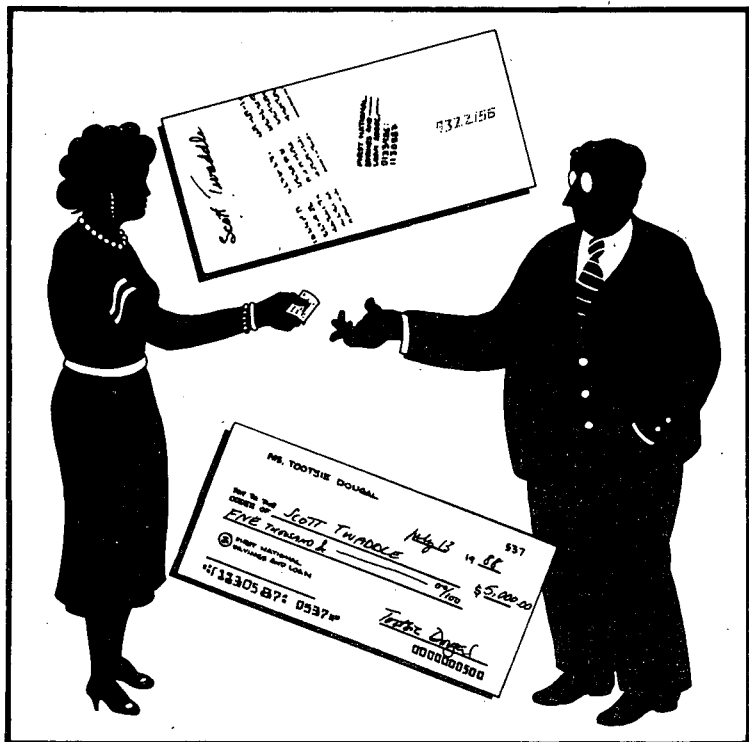
"I thought so, but I couldn't find the canceled check for the longest time, until one day I found it in the pocket of my nightie."

"How did it get there?" Julius asked.

Tootsie blushed prettily. "I don't know, but here it is." And she handed Julius the check, both sides of which are reproduced here.

Julius frowned, examined it, then frowned again and said "Ah!"

What did he mean when he said "Ah!" and why do you think poor little Tootsie fainted dead away when he explained?



QUESTIONS

1. Had the check been cashed?
2. Do you think that the endorsement had been forged?
3. Had the check been cleared by the bank?
4. Do you think that a crime has been committed?
5. Why do you think poor little Tootsie fainted dead away?

See page 135 for the solution to the March puzzle.

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FICTION

Revocation

by Mel Washburn

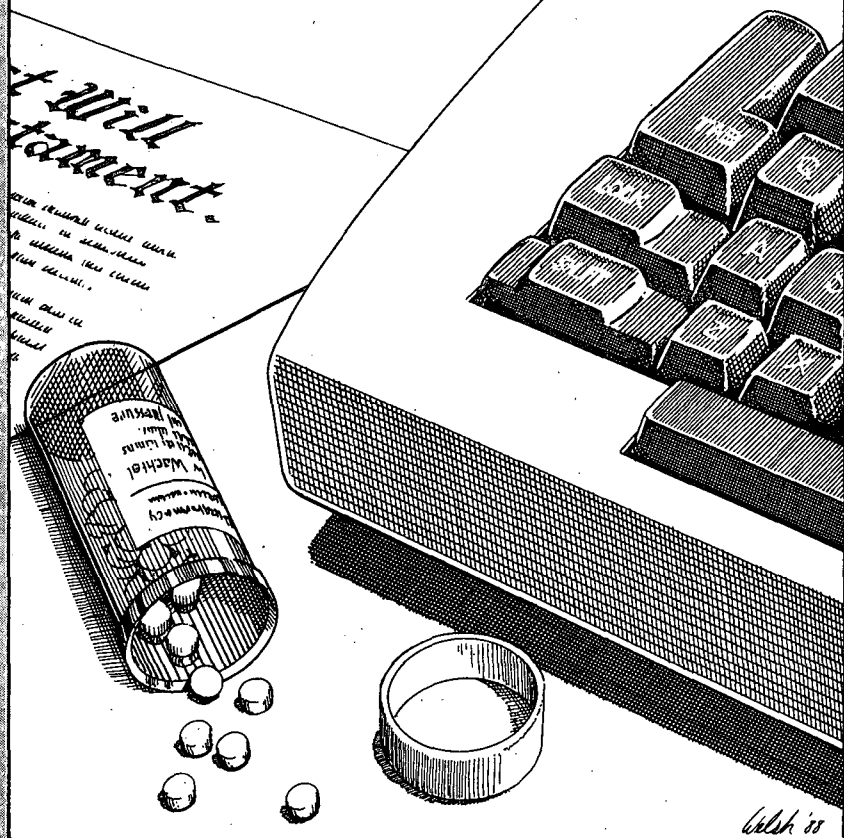


Illustration by Patrick Welsh

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The entire town was just prostrated by the August heat. The grass on the lawns lay parched and brown. The asphalt of the streets had begun to blister and crumble at the edge. Dogs lacked the energy to bark. Even the bugs on the sidewalks could barely crawl.

Inside the musty old house at Fourth and Garfield, Emily Wachtel lay in her bedroom, drinking cold lemonade and holding wet cloths to her forehead. She was feeling poorly, and her nephew Freddie thought it served her right. He knew very well that she was as rich as Standard Oil, yet she refused to spend a penny on air conditioning. Instead she, Freddie, and the housekeeper Olga sweltered and stewed in the airless house. Freddie's only consolation was that Emily suffered the worst.

"Oh, Freddie dear!" she called from her bedroom. It was only recently that she'd begun calling him "dear." For ever so long it had been "you fool" and "you clown." But now it was "dear." It had taken him several humiliating months of wheedling and toadying, but at last he had gotten her to stop despising him. No mean accomplishment, he thought, when nearly everyone who knew him well considered him thoroughly despicable.

"Freddie dear," she repeated sweetly when he came into her room, "do you remember five years ago when you failed your exams and left law school?"

Was she going to nag him about that again? Freddie thought she'd done with nagging him. "I certainly do, Aunt Emily," he said with a hangdog look of contrition.

"Well, I wanted to ask—you've explained how it was all bad luck, how your professors weren't fair, and so on. That means, doesn't it, that even though you flunked, you'd still learned something about the law? The basics, I mean?"

"I suppose so." What was she getting at?

"And you learned a bit about wills and things, didn't you?"

"I certainly did!" Freddie's heart gave a little leap of joy. Did she think she was going to die soon?

"I thought so." She smiled almost sweetly. "I want you to help me write up a new will. My old will leaves everything to the Wildlife Society. But I want to change all that."

Quite right, thought Freddie. Gang of goggle-eyed old bird-watchers. What do they need with your money? He went to the hall closet, pulled the old portable typewriter down from the shelf, and carried it up to Emily's room.

"A trust?" Olga hissed angrily a half hour later when he went down to the kitchen to share his good news. "Vot good iss a trust?" Her blue eyes glowered. Her pink Teutonic face reddened. And the powerful muscles of her forearms moved rhythmically as she clenched and unclenched her fists. Freddie always felt a thrill of excited terror when she got angry this way.

"A million dollar trust," he said emphatically. "That's an awful lot of money."

"Oh, pooh! Pah! How much in your pocket?"

"Fifty thousand a year, every year of my life."

"And when you die?"

Freddie's eyes clouded over and his lip quivered. "I don't like that kind of talk, sweetheart. Not about me being . . ." He couldn't say it. "Being . . . you know."

"Oh, pah! You'll live a hundred years. But even then, *liebchen*, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, they must have something to live on."

Freddie frowned some more. He and Olga had been secretly married a week ago. Freddie hadn't thought yet how that would mean . . . you know, kids and everything. "I'm afraid our grandkids won't get a cent of the old cow's money. At my, um . . . my . . ." It had been hard

enough for him to type the word when Emily was dictating her new will. He couldn't say it now. "My, um . . ."

"Your death?"

"Um-hum. That." He coughed. "The money all goes to the Wildlife Society. The entire million. Everything."

"This is no good," announced Olga. "I have agreed to spend the rest of my life with you. But I cannot haff my children disinherited. I could haff married other men. Rich men." She reminded him again how old Mr. Saltwander, the retired school principal, had asked her to marry him. "He had a good pension," she said pointedly, "and wonderful life insurance. A million dollars at least I would haff had as his widow. But all of this I gave up so that I could marry with you. Now where is my widow's right? It's not fair." Her large, powerful hands began to work unconsciously as she talked, twisting a dishtowel up into a little mannequin, then twisting the neck of that little mannequin.

"You're right. It's not fair. Perhaps if I explained to Emily now . . ."

"No, *liebchen*, she likes you well enough now. And she likes me. But if she found out that we were married, she wouldn't like that."

This was true, Freddie had to

admit. The old cow would build all sorts of delusions around the simple fact of their love. She might decide that Olga had only married Freddie to get a share of her fortune. She might even suspect that the two of them were plotting against her. "Well, I think," said Freddie tentatively, "that this new will is no good anyway because it hasn't been witnessed yet. Aunt Emily wants you and me to sign as witnesses, but that won't do any good. *Testes no beneficeret*. I learned that in law school. It means a witness can't benefit. Because I'm named to benefit in the new will, my signature as a witness won't be valid."

Olga's broad, impassive face began to brighten as she saw a ray of hope. "Have you told the old woman this?"

"No. And neither will anyone else. She's trying to save money by using me instead of hiring a real lawyer."

"What would happen to her old will, the one that left everything to the wildlife, if this new will is no good?"

Freddie closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, straining to remember his lessons from law school. "Revocation by successive instrument," he murmured, like a gypsy medium repeating the words one. "No revival after revocation. The old will can never be any good,

even if the new will turns out to be no good either."

"And if both wills no good," Olga asked eagerly, "who gets the old woman's money?"

"She dies intestate. Everything goes to her next of kin automatically." Freddie smiled. "Which is me."

"My darling boy!" Olga wrapped her thick arms around Freddie and clasped him to her bosom, delighted that her children's children would not be disinherited. As she squeezed him tighter, breathing became rather difficult for Freddie. His eyes bulged and his vision dimmed, and generation after generation of pink-skinned, fairhaired descendants paraded through the dimly lit spaces between his ears. Just as he thought he might lose consciousness, Olga's affectionate enthusiasm subsided and she let him go. He sat down, hunched over, and gasped quietly for air while Olga thought aloud about what they should do. "Can't push her down the stairs. Can't just stick her head in the gas oven."

"Wish we could," wheezed Freddie bitterly. They'd often talked in a half-wishful way about doing the old cow in. Every imaginable method of slaughter using electricity, gas, defective automobiles, or slippery stairways had been dis-

cussed and rejected as too chancy or too obvious.

Olga frowned. "Must look natural. I have thought of the best way just now. We throw away her heart pills and in their place we put salt tablets so they raise her blood pressure instead of lowering it. Then slowly she dies, of natural causes."

"The perfect plan," said Freddie admiringly. What a woman he'd married. Such a large, healthy animal, but in addition so brainy, much smarter than Freddie himself would ever be. The perfect woman.

That afternoon Freddie and Olga witnessed the new will by writing their signatures beneath Aunt Emily's. That very evening, Olga began giving Emily salt tablets instead of heart pills. For the next several weeks, Emily lay in her musty room, combating the oppressive heat with cold compresses and weak lemonade. She grew feeble day by day, but every day she convinced herself that she didn't feel so very bad—no need to spend money on medicine or doctors.

As the old woman came closer to death each day, Freddie almost began to feel sorry for her. It was such an awful thing to watch. Her hair grew ashy gray. Beneath her rheumy eyes, dark shadows developed. The sweat

on her brow was white and cold. "Maybe we shouldn't do this," Freddie said to Olga one day. "After all, she never harmed us. She's only . . ."

Olga's deep blue eyes turned steely and she gripped Freddie's left elbow so tightly that an awful pain shot down his forearm, leaving his wrist numb, his hand useless. "Be a man," she said sternly in a low, menacing voice Freddie had never heard before. "I won't have a husband who is not a man. Better to be a widow than to be married to such a one."

Freddie's arm hurt so much that tears sprang to his eyes. "Yes, dear. Yes, of course," he cried softly. The man who failed Olga would die, he realized now. It was unthinkable to Freddie that he should die, so it was unthinkable that he should fail her. To doubt was to fail. So he never expressed any doubts again.

It didn't take long after that. The heat did half the work. The salt tablets finished the job. Emily's last words to Freddie were: "I don't think we should call the doctor just yet, do you? He's so expensive. And I don't feel that bad. Honestly."

After the funeral, Freddie very sorrowfully handed the new will to Emily's neighbor and longtime friend, Judge Conviser. "I don't know what's

in this," he told the judge with a deep sigh. "Poor Auntie typed it up herself and then had Olga and me witness her signature."

The judge sat down to read the will, then looked up solemnly. "I'm afraid your Aunt Emily has made a terrible mistake by asking you to witness her will," he told Freddie. "The will made you the beneficiary of a sizable trust. But because you witnessed the will, that bequest is invalid. *Testes non beneficeret*, as the old lawyers used to say."

"Which means?" asked Freddie, doing his best to look dull and ignorant.

"Literally it means a witness may not benefit. If a witness is named to receive something under the will, then the law must read the will as if the witness had predeceased the testator."

"Predeceased?" asked Olga.

"It means 'died before.' The law presumes a legal fiction and disposes of the assets as if the witness were dead. In this case, that means the trust is dissolved and its million

dollar corpus goes to..."

"The next of kin!" beamed Freddie, unable to restrain himself longer. "And that's me."

"But you are still presumed dead," the judge reminded him.

"That's true," admitted Freddie weakly. He was beginning to get the same sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that had afflicted him so severely during law school exams. The feeling that he had overlooked something which was perfectly obvious to everyone else. And of course it was not only obvious but crucial. Overlooking it would cause him to flunk the exam.

"At your death," the judge explained patiently, "the trust was to pass to the Wildlife Society. Since your death is presumed to have occurred, the trust goes in its entirety to..."

"To the wildlife," said Olga through clenched teeth. "Just as if Freddie were dead."

"As far as this will is concerned," the judge agreed, "Freddie might as well be dead."

"Might as well," repeated Olga decisively.

FICTION

One-Way Streets

by Sherri C.
Staat

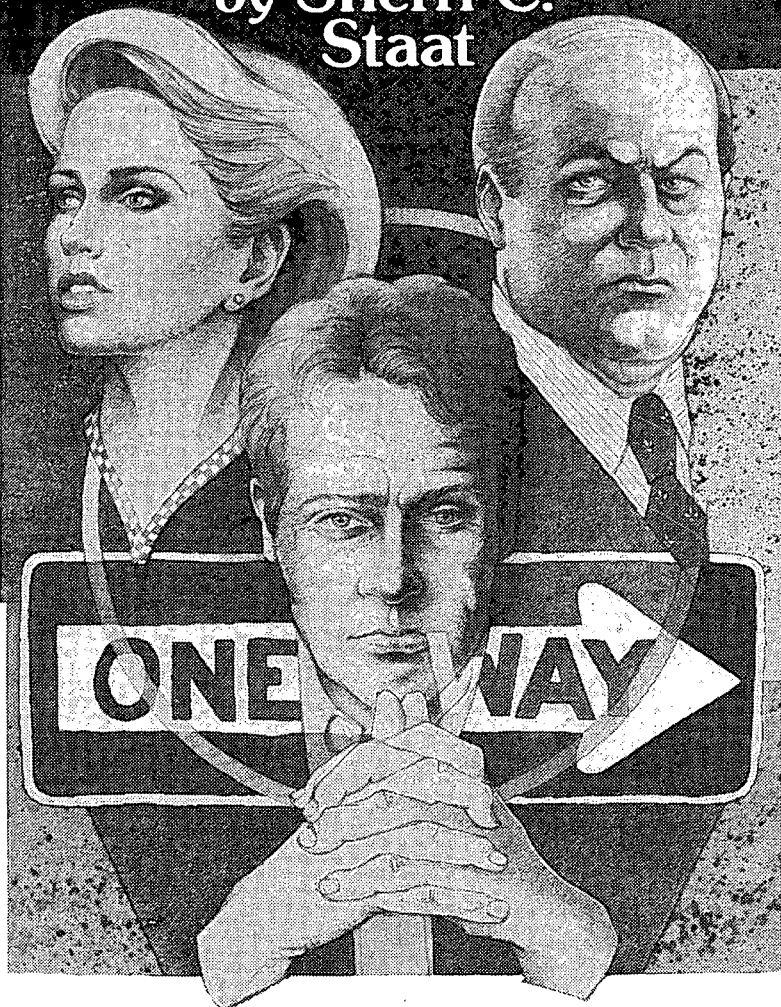


Illustration by George Thompson

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It's ironic when you think about it, really. I mean, the first time I saw Bobby, he was buried under a pile of enraged schoolmates, his chubby legs kicking impotently against his tormentors. And here he was again, chubbier legs drumming against the pavement, while the car resting on his chest squeezed the life out of him.

I first met him in sixth grade, shortly after he and his family moved to our neighborhood. Bobby was one of those kids who just couldn't make friends. In addition to a lumpy physique, and his total inability to play any kind of sport, he was a know-it-all. You know what I mean, some kids are a little strange, but they get along. Bobby didn't care if anyone liked him, and he pretty much deserved the various beatings that the local kids administered. He was smart, though, and I was barely passing math. From a desperation born of mutual need, we formed an alliance. Anyone threatening Bobby answered to me, and in return for my protection, he helped me with my homework.

Our high school years passed pretty uneventfully. I was captain of the football team, and Bobby headed up the debating society. I think it was during his debating years that his in-

terest in anticipating every consequence of every action took root. He would prepare his standpoint on any given subject, and then prepare the other side's possible arguments against his own position. From that, there formed an attitude, and later a fixation, that if a man planned carefully enough, there could be no unanticipated (and therefore unwelcome) events in his life. I never understood his philosophy. I don't think I had one at all until I stood watching him die on the street, and then it was somewhere between Thomas Wolfe's "You can't go home again" and the idea that the present is firmly rooted in the past. Not very original, I'll agree, but it certainly fit the situation.

My difficulties with math persisted in college. I was majoring in marketing, and was playing first string on the football team. My imminent failure in business accounting was threatening to get me sidelined during my upcoming senior year, and once again I called on Bobby. I hated to do it. He had become officious and patronizing since getting past the stage where arguments with one's schoolmates were settled with fists. He didn't need me any more, but I sure as hell needed him. He finally agreed to help me, with the provision that I

participate in an experiment he was conducting that had to do with motivation in the workplace. I agreed, against my better judgment, and passed my accounting class while acting as Bobby's stooge. And in a way this story begins with the end of that fall, because after graduating I never played ball again, and Bobby married Sarah.

I hadn't seen much of Bobby after he had gotten me through accounting the previous spring, and frankly, I hadn't missed him. His major was business administration, and he had a particular interest in efficiency. I swear the man was a walking cliché. He was the kind who carries a clipboard around a factory and tells men who have earned their living for years and years that they don't know what they're doing, and that if they changed some part of their routine it would save the company big money, which generally makes points with the factory owners, but usually results in complicating the lives of the poor working stiffs who were just doing their jobs. Why, you may well ask, had he tutored me in accounting? Because the little pissant wanted to measure the most efficient way to train an unwilling, obstinate student in a field for which he was totally unsuited. In this case, Bobby had elected

to educate me in physics. He *knew* I would fail because of my weakness in math, and I suspect he took a fiendish delight in watching me flounder throughout his experiment. My humiliation was his senior project. I always figured the joke was on him, since I did pass accounting, and led the team to a first place ranking during the early part of the following year. What I hadn't bargained for was a quarterback rush that put me out of the game for the rest of the season, and, ultimately, the rest of my life.

Oh, Sarah. I was starting to tell you how I ran into Bobby and Sarah on campus that fall. It was before I got hurt, and I was quite the hot item. I was walking across campus with the usual entourage (two cheerleaders and a couple of drinking buddies) when Bobby came into view, walking with the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, before or since. She had red hair, blue eyes of unfathomable depth, and a wistful loveliness that made my chest ache. Just to look at her made me want to compose a poem or write a song, anything to make the world a better place by knowing that she lived. I wanted to kiss her, or marry her, or at the very least, conquer a kingdom and make her my queen. She had that effect on me, I

swear to God. I yelled over to Bobby, asked him how he was doing, and hoped he'd have the poor judgment to introduce me to her. I was so sure that, given the choice between Bobby or me, she was mine. Interestingly enough, Bobby seemed eager to talk. He had never liked me either, but I suppose my standing on campus lent him some status, and I think he wanted to prove to Sarah that he did know, and was conversant with, people who didn't carry slide rules in their front pockets.

"So, Bobby, how you doing?" I asked. "How've you been since last spring?"

"Fine, fine, Pete. I heard you and the team have been doing really well this season. I haven't been to the games . . ." he trailed off lamely. Not one to let the conversation stop until I had the name of the goddess accompanying him, I racked my brain for something, anything, to say, to keep going until I could get an introduction. Failing to come up with an opening that even approached being clever, I decided to just ask for Sarah's name.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Pete, I completely forgot my manners. This is Sarah Pendleton, my student assistant. She's doing some research for me on my senior project," he gloated. The weasel.

Ever the gentleman, however, I smiled and extended my hand.

"Nice to meet you, Sarah. I'm Pete Williams, an old friend of Bobby's. We met again last year in an accounting class." Notice the upgrade of Bobby from bane of my existence to friend, and me from idiot quarterback to scholastic peer. Bobby didn't let it go, though.

"You remember Pete from my notes, Sarah," he said. "He's the one that I attempted to teach physics to in order to prove my theory about an employer's ability to motivate an uninterested worker into not only learning, but applying, information that the worker might be resistant to due to various prejudices about new versus old techniques in the workplace." Great, I thought, now she knows I'm an idiot. But she smiled that Sarah smile, shook my hand, and told me it was a pleasure to meet me. I was a goner in a New York minute.

"I've seen you play a few times this year," she said, "though not as often as I would have liked. Bobby is a real slave driver, but I'm sure I don't have to tell you that." She was wonderful; beauty, brains, and a graciousness that relieved me of the embarrassment that Bobby's comments had caused. I knew she knew that I had been a monkey in Bobby's lab,

and yet she made sure I didn't feel awkward. In fact, she knew that I knew that she knew, which was more than Bobby knew.

He just stood there grinning like someone who had inherited the family fortune and stood to spend the rest of his life sitting in the catbird seat. The idiot.

"So, Bob, what about the three of us getting a cup of coffee and catching up on old times?" I suggested. "I'd like to hear all about the project you and Sarah have going." I knew that would get him. He never could resist the opportunity to hold forth on his latest theory. The three of us walked over to one of the campus coffee shops, Bobby chattering about his senior thesis, Sarah listening raptly, and me trying to get a word in edgewise.

Over the next two hours I tried every trick in the book to get Sarah's attention, or better yet, interest, but damned if she wasn't fascinated by little Bobby Evanston. I couldn't believe it. I began to get a clue to the attraction when Bobby couldn't recall a detail of some experiment he was conducting and Sarah supplied it. He patted her patronizingly on the back, and she beamed with delight. If I'd been Sarah, I would have socked him.

"I tell you, Pete, this little

gem is the best thing that ever happened to me. She's smart as a whip, keeps the best notes I've ever had the pleasure to dictate, and is punctual to boot. What more could a man ask for?" What more, indeed. Sarah was breathtaking, and it occurred to me that perhaps she was a little tired of being noticed for her looks, rather than her brains. She was witty, and when she talked I felt ashamed that my first response to her was strictly from a physical standpoint. She was warm, funny, and I would have given everything I had (which admittedly wasn't much at the time) if she would have been mine.

But Bobby had her hooked. She was, I'm fairly certain, captivated by the fact that he was oblivious to her physical attributes, and she obviously believed in him and his vision of a brave new industrial world. What a waste.

I spent quite a bit of time with them after that, strictly so that I could be near Sarah. It was obvious after a time that she was in love with Bobby, and eventually even he noticed that there was something more to their relationship than a shared passion for economics. And so, the following summer, after we had all graduated, Bobby married the woman I loved, and I stood up for him as best man.

I know I mentioned that I got hurt during that last year in college, and that pretty much finished any chance of playing pro ball. Luckily I fell into a job selling sporting goods on the road, and later was promoted to regional sales manager. Occasionally, I went to various cities to check up on our clients and competition. It was a good job. I liked the travel, liked the people, and best of all, I got to stay in sports, albeit on the sidelines. Bobby and Sarah moved to New York City, where he began a meteoric rise to the top of one of the Fortune 500 companies. It wasn't long before they had a house in Connecticut, a Volvo, and an Irish setter custom-made to look terrific lying in front of their fireplace on a frosty autumn day. I stayed in touch, stopping by every time I was in New York. It was a little difficult to see Sarah after the move to Connecticut because Bobby didn't have the social grace to invite me home when I stopped by. But I never made a trip to the city without seeing him, on the off chance that somehow I'd see Sarah.

About six months after the move to Connecticut, I made one of my quarterly trips to service my New York accounts. Naturally, I stopped by Bobby's office to keep in touch, and to try to con an invitation home

out of him. His office was plush, his secretary one of those who Took Business Seriously (and, I suspect, used Bobby's position in the firm to keep the rabble in the secretarial pool at a distance). I noticed the hushed, cloistered atmosphere that one would normally associate with a church as I sat waiting in the reception area a suitable length of time. Eventually, I was shown into Bobby's office, where he rose to greet me looking every bit of forty years old. He had gained quite a bit of weight, affected a pipe, was balding rapidly, and fired the opening volley before I was seated.

"Pete, it's good to see you. I'm quite pleased that you felt free to stop by, but in the future, please schedule an appointment with my secretary so that your disruption of my day will be kept at a minimum."

"Good to see you, too, Bobby," I replied. "I didn't realize old friends had to make appointments to see one another."

"Oh, it's Robert now, Pete. Bobby is so, you know, juvenile," he said, totally ignoring my sarcasm. I asked after Sarah, got a minimal response, and then asked after his job, whereupon I got a twenty minute discourse on something that I didn't bother to follow. Instead, I stared over his head, out the window that framed him behind his

desk, and watched an ominous-looking storm roll into the city. Sure enough, after about half an hour, it began to rain hard, and as Mother Nature wreaked havoc on New York, I began to formulate a plan to force Bobby to take me home with him.

"Well," I said, standing, "I've taken enough of your time, Bobby."

"Robert, Pete. It's Robert now." I made a mental note to never slip and call him Robert, especially in front of the plebeians who worked for him. Just call it a little friendly torture. I faked a startled look outside.

"Jeez, look at the rain, will you? I was so engrossed in your story that I didn't notice the rain. I'm supposed to catch a plane tonight for Des Moines. Do you suppose I could use your phone to see if my flight is still scheduled for departure?"

"Sure," Bobby shrugged, clearly indifferent. "Just punch any line and dial out."

I called the airport, and sure enough, it appeared that no flights would be leaving that night. Lucky for me I hadn't planned to leave New York for three more days, but there was no reason for Bobby to know that.

"Uh, Bobby, my flight's been cancelled. Can you recommend any hotels nearby?" In my wild-

est imaginings I never expected him to do the right thing and invite me home at the first hint, but I was patient and realized that sometimes these things take time.

"I'd have no idea, Pete; let me ask my secretary to book you a room." He buzzed the outer office, and Miss Efficiency was instructed to reserve a room in my name immediately. Clearly my presence was really beginning to annoy him. I'm sure he'd had his little day all planned out, and the disruption was driving him nuts. I loved it.

"Mr. Evanston?" It was Miss Efficiency, looking a little fearful as she approached him, much as a dog would after being caught making free with its owner's new slippers. "I'm having a little trouble finding a room. Apparently the storm has shut down the airport, and most of the hotels are completely filled." Before Bobby could order her to find me a room in New Jersey, I jumped in.

"Well, that's okay, Bobby, how's about I stay with you at the house tonight? I'm sure the trains are running, and it's been a long time since I've seen Sarah." I glanced over at Miss E., who was looking horrified at my reference to Robert as Bobby, and confided to her that I had been best man at the Ev-

anston wedding, which left Bobby absolutely no alternative but to invite me home. After all, what kind of person would strand his best man (and, by extension, friend) in the middle of a storm? I knew the little martinet would die before he would be caught looking bad in front of the troops, and so he slapped me on the back and told me that he wouldn't hear of my staying anywhere but with him. Sure. I hadn't seen Sarah in six months, and was hoping the rain would accommodate me by sticking around for the next three days so that I could spend as much time with her as possible while Bobby was making the world safe for efficiency. Bobby gathered up his briefcase, overcoat, hat, and umbrella, and suggested that we grab a cab for the station.

"What about calling Sarah and letting her know that you're bringing me home?" I asked. "After all, she's going to have to set an extra place for dinner, and get the guest room ready and all," I said. "I really hate to impose, and the least we can do is give her some warning."

"No need, Pete. Sarah is a model of efficiency," he replied, raising his voice to ensure the staff would hear. "I've really insisted that we practice what I preach here at the office, and

she's been instructed to be ready for any contingency in order to keep disruption of our routine to a minimum." Jesus, he sounded like he was Hitler talking to Rommel about whether or not they should brief the army before invading Africa. I gritted my teeth, reminding myself that with a little luck I might get to spend a day or two with Sarah if I could just endure a ride in a cab and train with Bobby without clubbing him to death.

The trip to the suburbs was pretty grim. Bobby got into a snit because the train was late, which wasn't too surprising when you considered the weather. When I ventured a suggestion that we roll with the punches and get a cup of coffee while we waited for the train, he responded irritably.

"You don't understand. The train's late, and it's thrown off the evening. I'm supposed to be home by now, and we haven't even left yet." Like a fool, I assumed Bobby was worried that Sarah would be concerned because he was late. To my amazement, even I underestimated his selfishness.

"No, no, it's not because of Sarah," he said when I tried to calm him down. "I've calculated the time it takes to get home, have dinner, read the paper and smoke my pipe so that I'm in

bed no later than ten P.M. At the rate we're going, it's going to be at least eleven before I get to bed."

"Do you have an important meeting or something tomorrow?" I asked, wondering why on earth he was so concerned about missing his beddy-bye time.

"Of course I do. All of my meetings are important." Talk about giving a guy an opening and having him drive a truck through it. I could have kicked myself for having asked the question. "My life is a study of efficiency, with no wasted motion or time," he continued with the fervor of a religious fanatic. "Don't you see that this time is wasted? Gone, with nothing to show for its having passed? I'm not catching up on work from the office because I'm having to sit with you drinking coffee while my damned train takes its sweet time getting here." He was really going off the deep end when the train pulled in, cutting him short, thank God. The little guy was positively obsessive. I couldn't believe anybody's having his life planned out to the nth degree the way Bobby apparently had. You would have thought he'd have left fifteen minutes in for a cup of coffee somewhere along the way. I longed for us to get to the house and the serenity of Sarah.

We finally reached Bobby's stop, amidst a growing gale. Sarah was waiting patiently in the Volvo, reading a book of some sort to pass the time. We were nearly an hour late, and I couldn't believe that Bobby would have subjected her to the wait when we could have called ahead. My anger quickly melted when Sarah spotted me and, jumping from the car, bolted through the rain to give me a soggy hug.

"God, Pete, it's so good to see you!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea you were in town. It's been so long since . . ." she ground to a halt, suddenly aware that she hadn't even glanced at Bobby, much less greeted him.

"Hello, dear, how was your day?" she asked, seemingly afraid that he might tell her. I knew exactly how she felt.

"A complete waste of time," Bobby grumped. "I barely got started on that new project this afternoon when Pete stopped in. Then the rain started and he couldn't leave, so I had to bring him home. Then the train was late, and I'm just hours behind schedule."

Good to see you, too, you jack-ass, I thought. If he thought for one minute that the past few hours had been a little bit of paradise for me, too, he was crazier than even I gave him credit for.

We piled into the car and

headed home. Bobby nattered at Sarah, which gave me time to study her from the back seat. I couldn't be sure because of the reflection of the rain on the windshield and the glare of approaching headlights as we passed through the night, but I could have sworn that Sarah somehow sparkled less. She looked magnificent, as always, but somehow the beauty and liveliness that I had always equated with her seemed muted. She seemed subdued while Bobby raged about his day, not as if she was afraid, but almost as though she was somewhere else, and very, very, alone.

We pulled into Chez Evans-ton around seven thirty P.M., with the storm increasing in intensity. We stampeded for the house, where our attempt at a hurried entrance was hampered by the capering Irish setter, who seemed delighted by the rain and the mud the storm had generated. By the time we got in, I was wet and muddy from the dog's efforts to greet me. Sarah busied herself in hanging overcoats, and made a futile effort to wipe some of the mud from my pants.

"Hey, hey, don't bother, Sarah," I said. "It's only a little mud. Let it dry and I can probably brush it off." I suddenly realized that I couldn't very well stand around in muddy clothes until they dried, and so

I asked if she had a bathroom where I could get cleaned up and change.

"What do you think we are, Pete, barbarians?" Bobby asked, pulling on the role of the village squire like an old sweater, now that he was where he was supposed to be, albeit behind schedule. "Sarah keeps the guest room ready for use at a moment's notice, and I know there's a clean towel in the guest bath. Make yourself at home, and join me in the den for a brandy after you've gotten yourself cleaned up." Join him? What about Sarah?

What was all this foolishness about the guest room and bath being kept at the ready, anyway? I mean, it wasn't like anyone in their right mind would choose to stay at Bobby's. I figured I would be the first guest to ever spend the night at their house, and felt a little bit like the guy in the movie whose car breaks down in the storm, requiring him to take shelter in the nearest castle. Despite my intense desire to spend a day or fifty with Sarah, I was beginning to feel a certain dread creeping in. I just knew a hunchbacked lackey was going to pop out and offer to carry my bags.

I suddenly realized that Sarah was gone, without a word, and asked Bobby where she was.

"Oh, she knows our little rou-

tine. She's lighting the fire in the den, pouring me a scotch, and getting my pipe ready. Dinner will be on the table in half an hour," he concluded with the certainty of a man who was betting the sun would rise in the east.

"Well, jeez, Bob, I haven't seen Sarah since forever. Can't we just sit down and catch up? I'm sure dinner's ruined anyway, what with us getting in so late."

"No need to worry, Pete, old man. Like I said at the office, we practice what I preach here, and I challenge you to find a wasted minute or motion in Sarah's day," he smiled. I couldn't believe it. He was actually pleased that he had bullied Sarah like some monkey to live, if that's what you wanted to call it, in the world according to Robert Evanston. I had been right, then. My Sarah was alone. I could have strangled Bobby on the spot.

I was shown to the guest bath, where I showered and changed into some dry clothes, and emerged about half an hour later feeling a little more optimistic. After all, Bobby would have to go to work the next day, and I was going to have Sarah all to myself. I hoped the change I had seen in her was my overworked imagination. In any case, I couldn't imagine anyone

or anything keeping Sarah down for long.

I found Bobby sitting in the den, feet up on an ottoman, smoking his pipe and reading the *Wall Street Journal*. Crossing the room, I glimpsed a flash of Sarah setting the table in an adjoining dining room, where I headed as soon as I had made myself a drink.

She was frantically setting out a centerpiece, keeping a nervous eye on the clock. I went around the table and laid my hand on her arm.

"Sarah, don't," I said quietly. "Don't do this. We don't need a centerpiece, for God's sake. We don't need a gourmet dinner. We are old friends, thrown together for an evening. Please come sit with us in the den. I can rummage around in the kitchen for you, if you like, and maybe scare up some cheese and crackers or something. We really don't need all this," I concluded, gesturing at the table so rapidly and beautifully laid out.

"You don't understand, Pete," she said, sotto voce. "Robert wouldn't hear of us making do in the den. Now, please, just join him until dinner is served. We'll have time to talk later."

She had moved into the kitchen, and was busily stirring something on the stove, shoving things in and out of the

microwave, and hustling as though she had to meet a deadline at the *New York Times*.

"Sarah, what the hell is going on?" I asked.

"Not now, Pete," she said, sounding somewhere between plaintive and curt. "Just please let me get dinner on the table. Robert expects his dinner in seven minutes, and I'm running behind."

"That's another thing," I continued, as though she hadn't spoken. "What's this 'Robert' crap? When did he stop being Bob? And why, in God's name, are you buying it? Sarah, I know you, what is happening?"

"Robert, dinner's served," she called out, moving deftly around me with something fragrant in a covered bowl. She refused to meet my eyes. The storm howled as though in frustration outside, and I fought down a desire to join it.

Bobby walked deliberately into the dining room and sat down at the head of the table. He unfolded his napkin, adjusted it precisely on the center of his fat little lap, and without even looking up to check to see if anything was being passed, he held out his hands for a bowl. Sarah was right there, bowl in hand. I hadn't seen better hand-offs when I'd played college ball. How long had they practiced that move?

Dinner was quiet, with the exception of the rain pelting against the windows. I could barely eat, sickened by the change in Sarah, and the travesty of her marriage. And yet, like someone slowing down at the scene of an accident to have a look, I couldn't stop watching. At once repelled and drawn, I watched them in carefully choreographed moves as they ate their dinner.

I was clearing my throat in preparation for making an attempt at dinner conversation when the storm finally had its way with the power lines, and the house was plunged into darkness.

"Sarah," Bobby said in measured tones, "get the candles."

Sarah sprang to her feet and fumbled her way in the dark towards the kitchen. I got up to help her, since it was obvious that Bobby wasn't going to move. Apparently that wasn't part of his routine. Between us, Sarah and I got into the kitchen, where she groped for a drawer while I searched for matches.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, "we're out of candles."

"Sarah, this has gone too far. Come on, we'll just move into the den and eat near the fire. There's plenty of light in there to eat by."

"No, you don't understand," her voice was desperate. "We've

got to find some candles. Oh, God." The last was spoken as though she was about to cry.

"Sarah," Bobby called, voice raised, "where are the candles?"

I pictured him sitting in the dark eating his dinner. What did it matter if he had light or not? He sure as hell knew where everything was on that table.

"We're out, Bobby," I said from the doorway of the kitchen. "Why don't we go into the den and finish in there?"

Bobby's voice echoed ominously in the darkness, "Sarah, the candles. Bring the candles at once." The last bit was spoken in restrained, but threatening tones, with an unspoken warning floating in the air.

"We're out, Robert," Sarah replied forlornly. "I'm so sorry; I forgot to pick some up at the store."

"You were in the store when?" Bobby queried.

"Today," she replied, her voice barely audible.

"Today," he repeated. "And did you not hear the weather report today?"

"Yes, Robert, I heard."

"And you did not think to pick up candles in case the very real probability of a power failure occurred?"

"No, Robert. I forgot."

Now, I had been standing in the doorway between the

kitchen and the dining room during the Spanish Inquisition, and I'm ashamed to say that I didn't stop it sooner. But like I said before, it was like being at the scene of an accident. I didn't want to look, but I had to.

I heard the scraping of Bobby's chair as he rose from the table, and I suddenly was afraid that he was going to hit Sarah. Over candles. I stepped into the doorway between them, spun Bobby around towards the den, slapped him hard enough on the back to stagger him, and suggested we gather around the fire in the den with a drink to catch up on old times.

"You meet us in the den," Bobby snarled. "I've had it with this foolishness, and I want to speak to my wife. Alone."

Well, even ex-jocks can take a hint. So I excused myself and followed the pattern of the fire dancing on the walls into the den, where I poured myself a stiff drink and did my damndest to eavesdrop.

"HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU TO KEEP CANDLES, BATTERIES, CANNED GOODS, AND BOTTLED WATER ON HAND IN THE EVENT OF A CIVIL DISASTER?" he whispered fiercely. I was amazed he hadn't mentioned the possibilities of civil unrest, nuclear war, or any number of other catastrophes.

If it hadn't been so pathetic, it would have been funny.

"Robert, I'm sorry. I just didn't think . . ."

"Exactly!" he interrupted. "That's just your problem, Sarah. You never think. If the world ran the way you would have it, there would be chaos. I suppose you were busy stopping to smell the roses today, instead of tending the house?" he finished viciously.

It got very quiet for a moment, and then Bobby evidently decided that enough had been said for the moment. I heard him turn towards the den, totally unaware that I had listened to the entire tirade, and finish Sarah off with instructions to clear the dining room and join us when she had the kitchen in order. When she asked if she could wait until the power was on so that she could see, Bobby told her no, and reminded her again that if she hadn't dreamed away her day, she wouldn't be cleaning up in the dark. A moment later, he strode into the den, skin blotched with fury.

"Women," he muttered (please, God, I thought, don't let him say it), "can't live with them, can't live without them." Evidently, God had other things on his mind, and missed my brief prayer.

Bobby poured himself a drink,

and sat brooding in his armchair, no doubt plotting some suitable punishment for Sarah. As for me, I sat brooding on the loveseat, trying to understand what had happened to Sarah. Bobby had always been a nutcase in my opinion, and so I wasted no time in trying to figure his angle. But Sarah was a horse of another color. She was beautiful, bright, well-educated, and certainly nobody's doormat. Could it be that she had become unbalanced under his tyranny? I pushed the thought away, not wanting to face it, and then approached it again, cautiously turning it over in my mind. She had been a little insecure when she'd married Bobby. It had been obvious even in college that she had needed someone to believe in her, in something other than her looks. Kind of like Marilyn Monroe, I thought. I continued musing in silence until Bobby rose, stretched, and announced he was retiring for the night. Sarah was still fumbling in the kitchen, and when I made a move to help her so that she could get to bed as well, Bobby insisted that I, too, go to bed.

"After all," he said, glaring in the dark towards the clatter in the kitchen, "she made her bed, let her lie in it." I stifled a slightly hysterical giggle at the unintended pun, and al-

lowed myself to be guided down the hall and into the guest room.

As soon as Bobby left me, I cocked the door open, listening for an opportunity to slip back into the kitchen for a heart-to-heart with Sarah. Bobby moved around the master bedroom, brushed his teeth (one hundred times—I counted), and then finally I heard him grunt as he lowered his bulk into bed. I waited about ten minutes, and then made my way back to the kitchen to talk to Sarah.

I made a slight sound as I entered the dining room, so as not to startle her in the dark.

"Sarah?" I whispered.

"In here, Pete, the kitchen. I'm just about finished."

"Sarah, please," I begged, "talk to me. I'm going to put an extra log on the fire, and so help me, if you don't join me, I'll wake up Bobby." How's that for a threat, I thought. Sure enough, she was in the den in a minute, cradling the brandy I'd poured her, and staring in embarrassment at me.

"Sarah, I've got to know what's happened to you. I can't leave until you tell me, so you might as well spill. And if you say that nothing's happened to you, then I'll have to give up a very cherished memory of an entrancing young college girl that I loved with all my heart.

Don't make me do that, Sarah. If I can't have you, please let me help you," I concluded gently.

She stared at me gravely, sipped at her brandy, took a shuddering breath, and began:

"Pete, I really did love him. I knew you loved me, too, but somehow his intensity gripped me. You were so easy-going, and I was sure that Bobby was going to make a difference in the world. God knows, he's still sure of it. So, I grabbed hold of his coattails, hanging on for dear life, and the first year wasn't too bad." She paused for another sip, and continued.

"At first, you know, he would come home from work all excited, and we'd discuss his theories and plans for the future. I was included, don't you see? Not as an appendix, but he really wanted my opinions, and we were a team. I kind of enjoyed the fact that I was behind the scenes, you know, the power behind the throne routine, but then I think Bobby began to realize that, too, and he couldn't take it. Gradually he began making changes at home, in our married life. At first they seemed harmless, and so I didn't fuss. After a while, I began feeling suffocated, and when I talked to him about it, he would start talking over me, expounding on efficiency, on not wasting time, on not . . . well," she

said interrupting herself ruefully, "I'm sure you've heard it all, and God knows it doesn't bear repeating. Anyway, this was all happening after we made the move to Connecticut, and I was so isolated that I guess I didn't realize how insidious the whole thing had become. After all, without friends or family to hold up a mirror, sometimes things get muddled without our realizing it.

"It was just a few months ago, in December, when I discovered I was pregnant. I was ecstatic, and Bobby wasn't displeased, which was about the most I could hope for. He was very obsessive about the pregnancy, just like he was everything else. I was to be prepared for any possible eventuality, you know the routine." She paused at that point, and dropped her eyes to floor, as though she couldn't face me.

"Sarah," I prompted, "what happened?"

"I slipped," she replied. "I was carrying out the garbage one afternoon and stepped outside without watching where I was going. There was ice on the step, and I fell. I lost my baby on the steps outside, alone, in the cold. When Bobby got home, he was furious. Not at fate, but at me. He accused me of killing our child through carelessness. And he's never let me forget it."

"And you stay with him? With that?" I gestured down the hall towards Bobby's snoring. "You know it was an accident, Sarah. Why don't you leave him?"

"I don't know any more, Pete. Right after I lost the baby, I was so confused and guilty as hell. Bobby fed on it, turned it on me, and even though I know he's wrong, that I didn't deliberately kill our baby, I keep buying into it. I guess I feel like this is my punishment. Like I deserve it," she concluded mournfully.

For the first time in my life, I truly wanted to kill someone. It was all I could do not to storm into Bobby's bedroom and hit him with the nearest blunt instrument. Bobby had not only destroyed Sarah, but had killed, once and for all, my love for her as well. I was sorry for her, sorry for the death of their child, but mostly sorry for myself. The Sarah I had known would never have buckled under Bobby's influence. He had slowly sapped her will, and she had let him. I had to resist an urge to shake Sarah for her part in the mess, but I calmed down and suggested we go to bed. Sarah seemed slightly stunned. I suppose she had thought she had found a safe shoulder to cry on, but early on in our conversation the sympathetic ear had turned to tin.

I was dreaming of a muffler, suffocating me slowly, when I awoke the next morning to an argument in the driveway. The guest room had a window overlooking the circular drive, and Bobby was dressing Sarah down in muted tones, oblivious of the fact that I had awakened and was standing, clearly visible, at the window.

"I told you to have the spare fixed," he hissed. "What kind of an idiot gets a flat tire, and then neglects to have it repaired?"

"I forgot, Robert," Sarah replied. "I'll take care of it today, I promise."

"Fine," he snarled, "how the hell am I supposed to get to the station? If I'm late for work, Sarah, so help me God . . ."

Sarah interrupted quickly, "I've called the village cab. It should be here any minute." She was crying now. "I'll get it fixed today, I swear I will." The last was spoken in a whimper.

Before Bobby could respond, it began to rain again in torrents, and he was forced to run to the cover of the front porch. As he began to start on Sarah again, the cab pulled up and honked.

"I'll meet you at the station tonight at six o'clock sharp," Sarah said placatingly, as Bobby splashed towards the cab.

"Just see to it that you do,"

he growled, not looking back.

I stood in the bedroom watching the rain, musing on how quickly circumstances can change. Twenty-four hours earlier, all I had wanted were a couple of rainy days alone with Sarah. Today, I didn't think I could face her. I figured I could cab it back to the train station and head for New York after breakfast, if I could stomach food after the recent scene I'd witnessed. I sighed, gathered together some clean clothes, and headed for the shower.

I dressed quickly, packed, and walked down the hall towards the kitchen, where I could smell fresh coffee, the nectar of the gods after the evening I'd had. Sarah was scrambling eggs at the stove, wrapped in a terry-cloth robe:

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she said as I walked in and poured myself a cup of coffee. How she could pretend that there was anything good about the morning was beyond me, but I figured it wasn't anything that a good psychiatrist and I couldn't figure out in ten or twenty years.

"Morning yourself," I mumbled.

"Scrambled eggs okay with you?" she asked, turning from the stove and smiling brightly at me.

"Uh, no thanks, Sarah. I think

I'll get some coffee and head on over to the station and get back to New York."

She looked up, startled. "Are you going off and leaving me after such a short visit?" I looked steadily over the top of my cup at her and thought to myself about how that routine would have worked in my college days. Sometimes, but not always, maturity is nice.

"Yeah, I've got some accounts to see. I'm afraid this visit will have to be a short one," I replied.

"But, Pete," she said, looking helpless, "I've got to get the car fixed, and I'll need help. Couldn't you stay and help me?" That last bit was delivered with a refill of my coffee cup. I gazed tiredly at her.

"Sarah, you just need to have the flat fixed. Call any garage and ask them to come out and patch it. You'll be okay."

"So you've been eavesdropping? I would have thought you were above all that. After all, you've never made a mistake in your life, so I'm sure you feel free to drop into *my* life, make a few judgment calls on how I've been living, and then ride off into the sunset, having had your say." The venom in her voice was unmistakable, as was the sarcasm. I'd had it.

"Sarah, quit," I said, getting angry. "You're out of line, and

you know it. You and Bobby have been playing games so long that you don't know reality from fantasy. I don't need this hassle, and I'm going to leave this morning, just as soon as the village idiot driving the cab is available."

She started to cry. I could have taken anything but that. I walked across the kitchen and held her while she sobbed. When she was through, she pulled back, and I caught a glimpse of my old Sarah in the depths of her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You didn't deserve that. I'm just so angry at myself and Bobby for this mess. You know," she said, laughing a little through her tears, "I'm not really sure who's at fault any more. At first it was easy to blame him, but I bought into his game too until it trapped me. I think I realized that last night after talking to you."

"Sarah, I'm no Fellini, but it seems to me that one, or both of you, should get some professional help. Maybe you can get the nerve up to leave Bobby, or at least gain some turf in this war." She grinned at that one, and I smiled back, despite myself.

"Let me get showered, and we'll work something out for getting you back to the station," she said, bounding down

the hall, and leaving me to stare at my coffee cup.

I was slipping, I could feel it. I had been so furious the previous night because I'd learned my Madonna was no Madonna, and the woman against whom I measured all others had feet of clay. It was a sudden adjustment, I'll admit, and I began to rationalize my way out of my anger, and back under Sarah's spell.

We got the flat fixed, and one thing led to another, and I didn't leave that day. Later on I wondered what would have happened if I had. Instead, we spent the day talking, and after the rain lessened, we went out for a drive. We had a terrific time, and I honestly believe we both forgot Bobby existed for at least a little while. It was only as dusk began closing in that we became aware of the time, and we made it to the station with five minutes to spare, like the good little soldiers we were.

Bobby's train pulled in at six sharp, and he was first off, heading for the Volvo. He pulled up short when he saw me, and gazed at me with undisguised irritation while accepting a perfunctory kiss from Sarah.

"So, Pete," he said, climbing into the car, "what's the matter, no trains back to New York today?"

I'd had such a great day that

I refused to bite. "I'm sure there must have been, Bobby, but I decided to throw caution to the winds and rearrange my plans for this trip." I knew that would get him. A man who didn't have time for an unscheduled cup of coffee would probably become rabid over such anarchy.

He didn't say anything, but sat silently in the car all the way home. Our evening was the same as the previous night's. Sarah got dinner, Bobby doled out the booze, and I was relegated to the den. This evening, though, Bobby didn't attempt to entertain me, but simply sat reading the paper. I grabbed a section and joined him, and was just settling in when Bobby leaped from his chair as though bitten by a snake.

"Sarah!" he snapped, "my humor—it's empty!"

Sarah came into the room, transformed again from sparkling Sarah to the drudge he, or they, had made her.

"Don't tell me you forgot to pick up my tobacco?"

The answer was so low as to be inaudible. I didn't need to hear her to know that there was no tobacco in the house. Bobby went nuts. He really snapped, I swear. The past two days, so full of distractions and unplanned events, had worn him to a frazzle, and Sarah's latest transgression pushed him right

over the edge. I was sure he was going to hit her, and I was pretty sure she was going to let him. I jumped up before Bobby had a chance to raise his hand, stepped between them, and suggested that he and I walk down to the village to get the tobacco. I figured the walk might give him time to cool off. He was so enraged he agreed; he even seemed glad of my company, so I hustled him out the door and headed down the hill.

The first quarter mile or so was quiet, which gave me time to notice the evening smells, so fresh after the rain. As we approached the town, Bobby began to mumble, at first incomprehensibly. Slowly his voice began to rise, his conversation spoken in cadence with our walk.

"She's stupid. She's a failure as a wife. She can't keep anything straight more complicated than a recipe." I was treated to more of the same, but as it was a monologue, it didn't appear that any reply was necessary, and I really didn't want to inflame him. As we approached the village, we encountered a series of one-way streets.

"Pete, here's a perfect example of her idiocy," he said, stepping off of the curb. "I've told her that every motion saved is a thing of beauty. I've tried to

train her on these very streets, you know."

I looked at him quizzically. "What do you mean, train her on these streets, Bob?"

"Well, these are one-way streets, right?" I nodded, wondering what he was getting at. "Most people have a habit of looking both ways before crossing a street, right?" Again I nodded yes. "Well, on a one-way street, you only need to look in one direction, the one that the traffic is traveling in, right?"

"I suppose so, Bobby," I replied, "but it's pretty hard to break the habit of a lifetime."

"Well, maybe we should," he snapped. "I've tried and tried with Sarah. I'll suggest a little walk, and sure enough, when we get to these streets, she looks both ways. I've *told* her and *told* her that she only needs to look one way, and that she can save time and energy by doing so. But she persists in looking both ways."

About that time we were stepping off the curb to cross yet another street at the foot of a gentle slope. I instinctively looked both ways while Bobby looked only in the direction where traffic was coming from. To be honest, it wasn't necessary to look at all; it was dinner time, and the streets were deserted. But I looked, and Bobby didn't, so he didn't see the Volvo

bearing down on him from the crest of the hill, heading the wrong way on a one-way street. Time slowed, as it inevitably does during an accident, and I leaped backward. Bobby had a second to watch the car bearing down on him, and I don't know if he was more surprised because it was traveling the wrong way, or because Sarah was behind the wheel.

The car hit him with a sickening thud, and came to rest on his chest. I don't think he died immediately, but there really was no saving him. I wrenched open the door, grabbed Sarah out from behind the wheel, and planted my hands in the ten-two position we were all taught in driver's education. Sarah was in shock, obviously, but she knew what she'd done. As soon as she could stand, I began yelling for help. A small crowd gathered, someone called an ambulance, and all hell broke loose. Sarah stood numbly, watching Bobby's legs sticking out from under the car. I think I was waiting for them to disappear, like the wicked witch's did in *The Wizard of Oz*, but he was very dead, frozen in an unforeseen moment forever.

The police arrived to sort things out, and I explained how the three of us had gone for a brief drive because I was thinking of getting a Volvo like the

Evanstons'. I told the officer in charge that I had parked the car at the top of the hill, and that we had walked down the street to stretch our legs.

"I'm not sure, officer," I said, "but I must have forgotten to set the parking brake." I looked properly mortified, and continued. "I have an automatic at home, and I think that maybe the car just slipped out of gear."

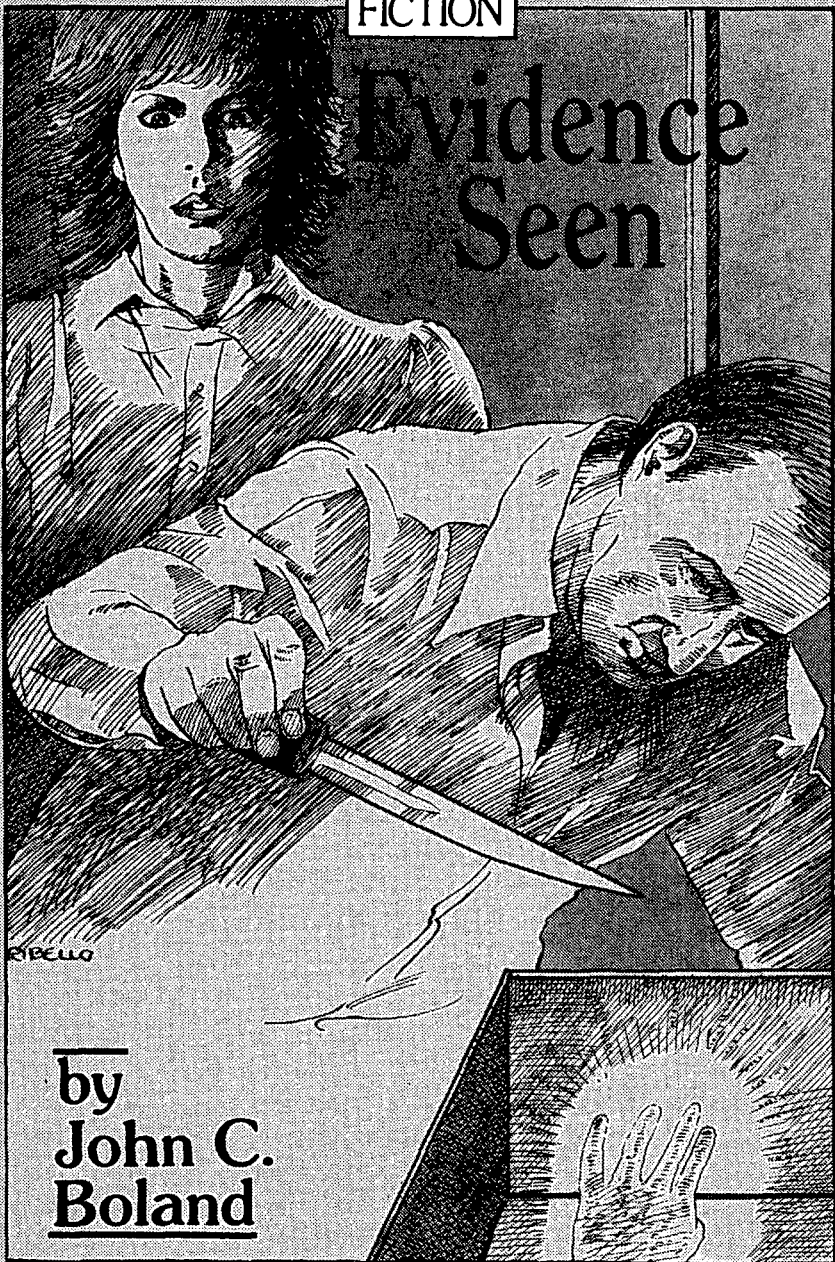
Well, there were no skid marks to indicate that anyone had been driving and had attempted to stop, and there was absolutely no evidence that my relationship with the Evanstons was anything but that of an old friend. In fact, Miss E., from Bobby's office, later gave a most affecting description of my having been best man at their wedding. She even told the police that my visit had been entirely unplanned, as she had been present when the storm had forced me to change my travel plans. Good old Miss E., she was good for something other than venerating Bobby.

Sarah was never suspected of having anything to do with Bobby's death, of course, which was, I suppose, my belated way of conquering a kingdom and making her queen. What she does with it is up to her. I know one thing, I don't want to know how it turns out.

Ever.

FICTION

Evidence Seen



by
**John C.
Boland**

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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It was a Victorian desk, with a fold-down leaf, a rack of tiny pigeonholes, and below, where a leg well otherwise would have been, three drawers. Someone in its history had painted it a bilious, semi-gloss green. Walt put a hand to his mouth and blew out his cheeks. "Ugh."

"Why, it's lovely," Mandy said. "Or will be, stripped and refinished. Look at the scrollwork at the top."

"I'm looking. Actually, it isn't bad." He was surprised as soon as he said it. He glanced down the churchyard, thinking that something else might catch his eye.

"It's not really an antique," said a tiny whitehaired woman, coming close. She wore a sensible tweed skirt and a blue sweater against the shadows that were spreading up Farrowers Hill. "It's not an antique by our local standards. *I'm* not an antique by our local standards," she added with a smile. "Name's Meggy Gibb; I volunteered to help Pastor Combs with the sale."

Walt Darrow introduced himself and his wife, uneasy at the display of friendship.

Meggy Gibb nodded. "Of course. You two bought the Garroway place. I saw it last winter in the real estate notices. How have you settled in?"

Walt and Mandy exchanged glances. "Pretty well," he said. "We've had lots of time."

He didn't care if his voice carried resentment. The town had offered not even a grudging welcome. No committees of housewives with time on their hands came to visit. No invitations arrived for Walt, who had made a living as a freelance journalist in New York, to sit on the Library Board. Yet he could think of no overt discourtesy that had been shown them; the town's response to their presence was indifference. While he blustered to Mandy about constipated minds, he secretly enjoyed his time and privacy.

Walt gestured to the desk. "How would you date this if it isn't an antique?"

"Oh, I'd say about 1890. It's an antique anywhere except here. Some houses in this town have sideboards that served King George. Rather a lot of them, really. This is worth about forty dollars. Does that sound fair?"

"It's fair, but I'm not sure we want it. Stripping the paint will take forever."

"I see your point. Why don't we say thirty dollars? We'll call it a belated welcome-to-town price."

A man from the sale helped them load it in the station wagon, but he wasn't along when

they got home. Trundling it inside, as far as the sparsely furnished front room, exhausted Walt's interest in the treasure. He went to the kitchen for a drink while Mandy admired the scrollwork under the feeble ceiling light. "Bring back a screwdriver—or better yet a knife," she called. "Let's get these drawers open."

"Hoping to find the last eccentric owner's stocks and bonds?" he asked.

She frowned at the "last." She said, "Not even we eccentrics paint the insides of drawers. I want to see what kind of wood we've got."

She went to work with the knife on the top drawer, flexing the blade between the lock and the frame. He heard the click as pressure on the bolt turned the lock. Scooting back a step, Mandy pulled.

"No stocks," she announced. "No nothing. Just solid cherry. Look at that! We got a bargain."

"If the rest of it's cherry," he said.

He left her working on the second drawer and went outside to lock the car. Traces of frost stiffened the grass, and he hurried. In the back seat he noticed a bag from Whistler's Pharmacy with typing paper and ribbons he had bought that afternoon. He grabbed the bag and slammed the door.

And heard the shriek.

He found Mandy in the middle of the living room, eyes narrow, giggling. "False alarm, darling," she said. "Someone's played an awful joke on us." But when she took her hands down from her face, she was pale around the unconvincing grin. She stared at the writing desk with loathing—and from a distance.

He stepped forward and looked. The drawer contained a hand—small, white, and perfect.

"Is it real?" she gasped. Fear had backed her up, but curiosity put her on tiptoes.

"It's a mannequin's," he said quickly.

"No, it isn't."

He bent. It sure as hell wasn't.

Papier-mâché? his mind offered. An elaborate construction of tiny sticks, two of them, bleached white, protruding at the wrist, wrapped in tissue-thin parchment that looked so delicate and white it might be translucent.

"It's small enough to be a child's," he said without meaning to.

"Or a woman's," Mandy said, looking at her own right hand, which was almost as white, almost as delicate, although a month's yard labors had reddened the knuckles and broken nails. The nails on the dead

hand were perfect, Walt noticed. He felt a sense of relief.

"It's real, isn't it?" his wife said.

"You'll have to ask whoever lost it."

"That's not funny."

"I know. I'm having an attack of the cutes." He got up, staring at the graceful thing in the drawer.

"You're more rattled than I am," Mandy said.

"You've got a burly husband to protect you in case the owner comes around."

"Well, he or she couldn't be very big. That's something. And it looks very old. Dried out, like a flower kept for years and years."

He closed the drawer gently.

The telephone sat on the floor in the kitchen. He pulled the directory from under it. It was the first time he had called the local police department, and he was mildly surprised when the line was answered at the police chief's home. Dewey, the town's only full-time officer, sounded annoyed, as if he doubted Walt's ability to identify a human part. "I was just sitting down to supper. I'll be by in forty-five minutes."

Walt had barely put down the receiver when Mandy called from the hallway. "There's someone at the front door!"

He walked out of the kitchen. His wife—nervous about an-

swering the door? They went together.

Pastor Jacob Combs stood in the porch light. As the door opened, he offered a gaunt, horsey grin that was interrupted by a dry cough. Despite the chill, his overcoat was open and his white-bristled throat was bare. "Folks, we made a mistake. Sold you good people something that wasn't ours to sell. I come to buy it back."

Walt stepped back, letting the emaciated figure inside. "It wasn't yours to sell? We thought everything had been donated."

Combs ignored the question. "If you can just show me where it is, we'll get it out to my truck."

"I guess you mean that someone who donated it has decided he wants it back?"

Combs' eyes shifted to the hall. "Is it down here?"

Mandy began: "We bought—"

"I'll pay you back your price."

Annoyed, Walt said, "That isn't exactly the point. We bought it because we liked it. That hasn't changed."

"But you bought something that wasn't rightly for sale," the old man said. "Surely you can see that the church doesn't want to arouse bad feelings about these sales. We'd never get anyone to donate again."

"Of course," Mandy said. "But this piece is special."

The old man sighed, rubbing

a knuckle under his nose. "You found something in it, didn't you? Something that in your innocent greed you're unwilling to give up."

Mandy shot her husband a frown. "I wouldn't say that."

"Money, perhaps?"

"You don't know?" Walt said. He pointed to the front room. "Come have a look."

Combs bent over the desk drawer, staring intently. When he straightened, it was with wide eyes. "What you've got there is a glory hand!"

Walt glanced at his wife.

"First one I've seen in ages." When he saw Walt's stare, Combs added, "Some folks call them witch hands."

"You mean that hand was cut off a witch?"

"No, no—course not. Wasn't cut off anything." His quick glance scouted the room. He plucked up the paring knife Mandy had used on the lock. "Never was attached. These things are like—like—you know what a will-o'-the-wisp is? Just a little puff of swamp gas. These is like that, except they're made out of something else."

He bent close, reaching out with the knife blade toward the pale object in the drawer. As the blade neared the back of the hand, Walt thought he saw a tiny spark jump.

It was gone.

Combs drew a hand down his

long jaw. "Perhaps you folks had better hang onto the desk. I'll have a talk with the owner."

Chief Dewey was perturbed by the absence of a hand. He lit a cigar in the front room, mumbling, "I don't believe in spiritual things."

Walt didn't, either. "You could talk to Pastor Combs."

"Even the Lord's registered agents can go senile. Old Combs is a great believer in hoo-doo. It appears he's got a couple of apprentices."

"Hardly," Walt said.

Dewey shrugged. "Why would you folks who've gone to college, got a little money from the looks of it, want to mess around with foolishness?"

As she closed the door, Mandy flicked off the outside light before Dewey reached his car. "He won't get my vote."

"At least you've still got your desk," Walt tempered.

The next morning, the hand was in the middle of the living room floor. Watering pot gripped tightly, Mandy came and collected him from the kitchen. In the strong autumn light, it stood out against the dark oak like a porcelain sculpture.

"Another will-o'-the-wisp," Mandy said woodenly.

"Take it easy. Combs is playing tricks on us."

"Sure."

"If it makes you nervous, wait in the hall. I want to see something." He bent and, after he was alone, reached out tentatively. He expected the cold hardness of china. Instead, when pressed, the flesh gave way fractionally until his finger felt bone. He removed his finger, and a tiny depression quickly smoothed itself.

"For God's sake, what are you doing?"

"Bring me a screwdriver."

She stopped at the doorway, and he had to go and take it from her. He strode back quickly and swept the tool down almost as if the blow were lethal. There was a snap of electrical discharge.

"Don't let it rattle you," he said, patting her back. "You always figured New England would be haunted."

"But why a—a missing left hand?"

He didn't answer. The night before, he was certain, it had been a right hand.

Combs came that afternoon to collect the desk. "Hope there's no hard feelings. The owner lady don't believe in ghosts. Or in the hereafter, I spect."

"Just get it out," Mandy said. "You can keep the thirty dollars."

Walt helped the old man load the antique into the back of a

pickup truck. "What's this glory hand made of?" he asked.

"Oh, hard to say. They got some psychics in Ipswich who say it's that supernatural material. What do you call it?"

For a moment Walt was at a loss.

Combs prompted: "The stuff that appears at seances."

"Ectoplasm?"

"That's it."

"Then it's not real."

It had felt real.

"I don't know about that," Combs said.

"How long has that desk been haunted?"

"Didn't know it was, till I saw the glory hand. Can't think why Mrs. Timberlane wants it back."

Maybe the hand belongs to a friend, Walt thought.

He brought in some firewood, dumped it near the hearth in the big room on the southwest. It was the only one that got really good sunlight, and there wasn't much of it today. "Sit tight, I'll get the wine."

The kitchen, for all its country charm, had the coldest floor in the house. He pulled a bottle of burgundy, grabbed glasses and a corkscrew. The fire had taken hold behind the screen. He sat down close to her on the sofa.

She took her shoes off, tucked

her feet under. "We're going to have to be more selective about flea markets."

"Right. No more on church lawns. We'll wait till the witches' coven has its annual fundraiser."

She raised a questioning eyebrow. "What did Chief Dewey say Pastor Combs was into? Hoo-doo? Like the rhyme in the old movie. A man with the power. Do you want cheese?"

"I've got the power," Walt said, suddenly amorous.

"You wait here. I'll get the cheese." She got up barefoot and ran across the floor. He heard her rattling in a drawer, then the grunt of the refrigerator door. An instant later came an explosive clatter and silence.

He got up slowly and went into the kitchen.

Cutting board, knife, and cheddar had hit the aged quarry tiles and scattered.

His wife stood with her backside pressed so hard against the sink that her denim jeans bulged at either hip. Her arms folded loosely, she stared at the corner behind him. He turned.

And looked.

After the delicacy of the hands, the sight jarred him. Pink ribbons of flesh and a jutting white bone stuck from the end of the foot, as if it had been hacked and ripped loose by

someone in a frenzy. If the thing had bled, it hadn't been here. His stomach bucked like a wild horse, and only anger saved him. He cursed Combs.

Pushing hard, he got Mandy past the relic and into the southwest room. He lowered her onto the couch. Beneath his hands, she vibrated like a leaf caught in the wind. He felt that way himself.

"Call Dewey," she said.

"I'd rather call Combs. He was supposed to take this *away*."

"Let Dewey call him. We need help."

As the police chief, paunchy and soft, stared at the thing in the kitchen, blood clogged his face. "So you couldn't resist."

"We—"

Dewey rounded on them. He licked his lips. "Have you joined a coven yet? There's a nice one nearby."

"We haven't joined anything or done anything. We want help," Walt said.

Dewey said softly, "You got yourselves into it. Find your own way out." He strode for the door. Holding it wide, with the autumn chill sliding in, he pointed a thick finger at Walt. "Don't you call me again. Not for a burglar. Not for anything."

He closed the door, almost gently.

"What gives him—" Mandy began. "He should be fired."

Walt smiled. "I wouldn't mind. But it won't happen on our say-so. Not unless you want to be the one to tell the Board of Selectmen that the chief is afraid of glory hands."

"They'd laugh us out of the village."

"This is Massachusetts, remember? They used to be pretty rough on hoo-dooers." He went back into the kitchen for a paring knife to destroy the evidence.

"It's the next turnoff," Mandy said. She sat beside him. The headlights picked out the white clapboard church from the early dusk. The lawn stood empty this afternoon, except for tangles of thick grass and wildflowers. He pulled into the shell driveway between the stern-façaded worship hall and the ramshackle parsonage. Wisteria clung to gap-toothed latticework, leaves long dead on the vine. Walt could smell the salt marsh that started at the bottom of Farrowers Hill and reached to the bay.

Pastor Combs shuffled out onto the porch, a pale claw wrapped around a tumblerful of whisky. "Figured you'd be showing up. Curious about the glory hand, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," Walt said.

"Afraid I don't know much." He tucked his eyes toward his drink, lifted the glass toward his lips. "My Uncle Cabot used to discover 'em all the time. Little boys' hands, way back before the war. That's when he was killed, 1940."

Mandy came onto the porch reluctantly. "Pastor Combs, is the glory hand like a haunting?"

His sharp little eyes had a secret to keep. "Expect it could be. Houses are haunted, aren't they?"

"But the ghost stays with the haunted object—the house, or the desk. Is that right?"

"Sounds reasonable." The eyes suspected something.

Walt said, "Why would Mrs. Timberlane's desk carry a glory hand?"

"She's an old widow. Soft in the noggin, or she wouldn't let the deacons take that desk when she wanted to keep it."

"You mentioned a group of psychics in Ipswich."

"May have."

"I was thinking there might be a good magazine article in this. . . ."

"No one'd print it."

"I was thinking of one of the Boston papers."

"You go ahead if you want. Them folks in Ipswich are fools, playing with something they don't understand. Make no mis-

take, the glory hand is nothing to meddle with."

"Is Mrs. Timberlane a member of the psychics group?" Walt asked.

"I don't know," Combs said.

Walt scouted the house before letting his wife enter. Then he brought out the bottle of wine that had been interrupted.

"Why didn't those visions go home with the desk?" Mandy asked.

He shook his head.

"Are you going to call that man with the psychics? What's his name?"

"Procter Gentry." Having wheedled the name of the psychics' leader out of Combs, he was reluctant to follow through. He wanted to keep their ghosts to himself. "Remember that house on Long Island?" he told her. "Once ghosts were reported, it became a tourist hangout."

In the end, he approached it circumspectly. He told Gentry by telephone that he was a writer interested in the occult and wanted to talk about the Ipswich group's work. When he drove there the next morning, Gentry turned out to be a large, wispy-haired man with a scientific frown.

"There's a local superstition about a 'glory hand,'" Walt

said. "Does it ring a bell with you?"

Procter Gentry stirred tea. From their window table at the diner, the village seemed oddly empty for such a bright autumn morning. Off covenings, Walt thought.

"It's no superstition," Gentry said. "I've seen one myself. It followed the murderer around like a puppy dog, forty-five or more years ago, I guess. He broke and confessed and they hanged him. It usually happens that way."

No wonder Mrs. Timberlane had wanted the desk returned.

"A murderer," Walt repeated. "Was the hand like a ghost haunting the killer?"

"More like his conscience," said Gentry. "What do you know about ectoplasm, Mr. Darrow? Not much? The mystics like to think it's something that has crossed from another plane, a dead loved one's transfigured substance, slipping from world to world just for the sake of shaking a table. Purest baloney! Ectoplasm stays right in the world where it's manufactured by loneliness, fear, guilt—any strong emotional energy."

"You mean it's imaginary?"

"It's thought to be real enough. You may have read about it in Richard Matheson's *Hell House*, for instance.

The composition makes perfect sense once you think about it. The stuff is made up of bits and pieces of everything imaginable, like dust off the table next to you, a little bit of your dandruff, cigarette ashes, nostril mucus, nap from your coat—anything handy that a person with just normal latent psychic powers could mold into the desired shape. That's why a person who's good at calling up spirit forms usually tests high on telekinetic skills—the ability to move objects with the mind; they've been doing it all along. Just like old Cabot Combs—that's the fellow they hanged—that's what old Cabot was doing, though he didn't know it. He was sure the glory hands belonged to those two little boys he'd murdered. But it was just his subconscious reminding him what he'd done."

Walt managed to swallow the jolt the name gave him. *Whose word*—he asked over the thumping in his chest—*did they have that the desk belonged to a Mrs. Timberlane?*

Only Pastor Combs'.

Whose Uncle Cabot had seen glory hands back before the war.

"That can't be the extent of your curiosity," Gentry said with a prodding smile.

"So it isn't just the killer who sees the, uh, vision?"

"Manifestation. No, because it's not an hallucination. It really exists, sort of like a dust ball somebody has sculptured." He seemed pleased with the analogy.

"I touched one," Walt said. "It felt like flesh."

"You're a brave man. Not many people would do that unless they knew what they were dealing with. And you know how to disperse the manifestation—the 'exorcism,' if you will?"

"The touch of metal."

Gentry nodded. "Any metal that can carry a magnetic charge, even a small one." He considered his tea, squinted at the sunlight. "Though some manifestations may be difficult to discharge. It depends on the static power that put them together."

"It varies?"

"Wouldn't you expect that? Some thunderstorms are mild, some ferocious. Some electrical generators produce a stronger magnetic field than others. That's all you're really dealing with. So you saw and touched a glory hand, Mr. Darrow. Can I assume your interest is not entirely journalistic?"

"An acquaintance of mine bought a piece of furniture," Walt said. "The glory hand seemed to come with it."

Gentry's scientific squint sharpened. He shook his head.

"Sorry, young man. It doesn't work that way. Now you're talking about what mystical folks call an 'aura,' a spiritual or emotional resonance left on an object. A haunting of a house, for instance, or an automobile that has a reputation as unlucky."

"What's the difference?"

"Science versus witchcraft, that's what! I don't believe auras or hauntings exist. Oh, I've been in houses that felt wrong, as if something unhappy had happened there, something rotten to the soul, and the place remembered. But that's a poetic description, not scientific. I could never find any evidence that a previous occupant had left any detectable charge on the place. And, God help me, I've never seen a ghost!"

Procter Gentry waved a hand at the coffee shop, which held a few late breakfast-eaters. "Some folks in town are certain that a member of the Psychical Inquiry Society must believe in every sort of nonsense—have hobgoblins in the belfry, ha ha! I only believe in what I have seen and can document—which means, measure objectively. I've seen a glory hand. I've got friends in Brighton who hooked an ampmeter to an icepick and got a faint reading when discharging a manifestation. But auras? No evidence."

"I've seen these hands," Walt insisted, slipping into the plural. "In a desk drawer."

"I take your word for it. I'm just saying you shouldn't assume the manifestation came 'with' a piece of furniture. It was created by somebody, most likely as an expression of profound guilt. Has your friend murdered anybody?"

"Of course not!"

"Perhaps somebody close to your friend, a visitor, has a guilty secret."

"Could a visitor create a manifestation from a distance?"

Gentry looked troubled. "I don't know. It would have to be a forceful mind at work—and a powerful guilt."

He paid the check and used a pay phone, watching Gentry cross the street huddling in the sunlight. "If Combs stops by, or anybody else, don't let them in," he told his wife.

He tried the operator and got a number for Edith Timberlane on the west side. He dialed, thinking he knew the answer—the desk belonged to Combs.

A young woman answered and said she was Joyce Timberlane. Her mother was at her Tuesday bridge club. Did he want to leave a message? Walt left his home number.

"Darrow," she repeated. "I think we know each other."

You're the writer who comes into Whistler's Pharmacy for stationery? New in town? I'm the Joyce who waits on you. You were in on Saturday."

His mind dredged up a compact brunette in her twenties, pretty, bored with the village, who had gotten him talking once or twice about New York. A natural flirt, he had thought with approval. He was wary about flirting in a small town.

"Hi, I remember," he said, unable to summon any small talk. "Could you ask your mother to call this evening?"

He left the phone, shaking his head. He had all but forgotten the weekend up to the point of that damned church market.

He drove home and made himself a drink, stronger than usual. Calling Dewey was out of the question. The police chief wouldn't tell him whether any young woman had been murdered in the village in recent years.

The phone rang and a frail voice said, "This is Edith Timberlane, and I'm so sorry about the desk. My daughter thought I wanted to get rid of it because it's so ugly. But it was my mother's and I couldn't bear to."

He set down the phone and went back to the kitchen.

He grew aware of Mandy watching him from the doorway. She wouldn't come into

the kitchen. Dramatizing or actually afraid—he wasn't sure which.

"What did Mr. Gentry have to say?"

"He said the things are demons of the mind."

"Whose mind?"

"Combs'. That Uncle Cabot he was so fond of killed two young boys before the war. That's why Cabot was seeing glory hands. It must run in the family."

"And just now?"

"The old woman changed her mind about the desk, just as Combs said."

She folded her arms tightly, shrinking within the faded plaid shirt that had been his. "Why don't you come along to the couch?" The invitation—and her strained smile said it was an invitation—was rare.

"In a little while." He sipped his drink and she went away. She *was* afraid of the kitchen, site of the raggedly butchered foot.

Idly, he glanced at the spot to the right of the doorway—

And saw it, pink-edged and ringed by crimson berries, the left foot this time. Dainty as the other had been, this was less ethereal, much less ethereal, a toenail broken, a hint of a tiny bunion, flesh bruised around the ghastly stump that ended at the shin.

The sense of revulsion hit

him belatedly, driving him to the sink for a knife, the first slight touch of which exorcised the ghost. He stood trembling against the sink. What he needed was another drink. He reached to the overhead cabinet. As the door swung wide, he choked off a scream.

On the shelf directly before him, it occupied the spot where the Old Taylor would have been, a tangle of brown hair falling across the forehead. He couldn't see the features until he brushed the hair aside. The action was almost a caress, because he understood. If a guilty mind ac-

cused itself of a horrendous crime, what difference was time? Past or future would be a blur to the conscience. He noticed that he still gripped the kitchen knife. He set it down.

"Walt?" his wife called from the living room.

He breathed deeply, making sure his voice was under control. "I'll be there."

He knew, looking at the dead face, that whether he wanted to or not he would soon arrange a secret date with the brunette at the pharmacy. Now that he understood, he felt the time was almost right.

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

Julius said that the bear was white. He had reasoned that the shape of her path had been a triangle and that the only two places where a triangle with sides due south, due north, and due west could exist were the North Pole and the South Pole. (Since there are no polar bears at the South Pole, she must have been at the North Pole.)

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Murder at Eleven

by
A. A. Milne

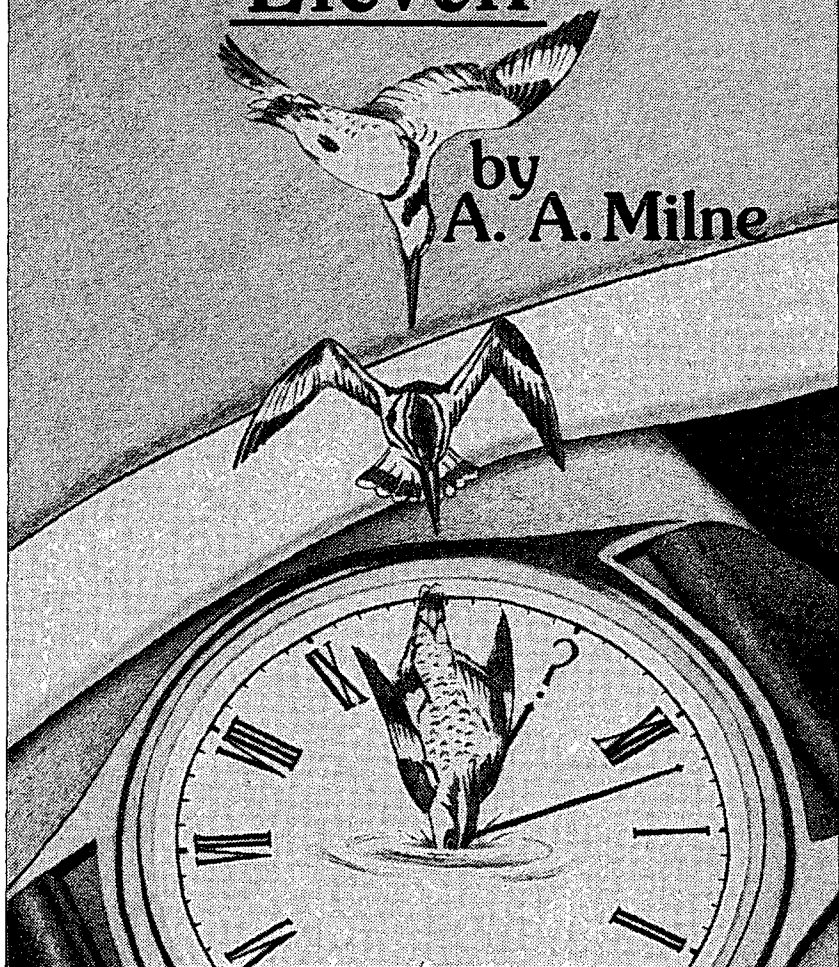


Illustration by Brian Battles

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Yes, sir, I do read detective stories. Most policemen will tell you that they don't. They laugh at 'em, and say that they aren't like real life, and that tracking down a murderer isn't a matter of deduction and induction and all the rest of it, which you do by putting your fingertips together or polishing your horn-rim spectacles, but of solid hard work, over a matter of months maybe. Well, so it is for the most part, I'm not denying it. But why should I want to read books which tell me what I know already? The more detective stories are unlike the sort of story I'm living, the better I'm pleased. I read 'em for the same reason that you read 'em—to get away from my own life for a bit.

Ever reasoned out why murderers in detective stories are always shooting themselves, or getting killed in a car crash, or falling over a cliff? Ever noticed that? I mean why a story-book murderer hardly ever gets brought to trial? Of course, sometimes it's because he's the heroine's Uncle Joseph, and it spoils the honeymoon if you suddenly wake up and remember that your Uncle Joseph is being hanged that morning. But there's another reason. Proof. All this amateur deducting and inducting is very clever, and I don't say it doesn't find the murderer sometimes; but it doesn't *prove* he's the murderer. Any police inspector knows half a dozen murderers he'd like to see with a rope round their necks, but he can't do anything about it. Proof—that's the trouble. I don't mean the sort of proof which convinces a reader who knows anyhow that his favorite detective is always right; I mean the sort of proof which convinces a jury when the judge has taken out all the bits which aren't legal evidence, and the prisoner's counsel has messed up the rest of it. And that's saying nothing about the witnesses who have let you down. No, it's an easy job being an amateur detective, and knowing that you've only got to point out to the murderer that logically he must have done it, to be sure that he'll confess or commit suicide in the last chapter. It isn't so easy for a country inspector like me, with a super and a chief constable and a judge and a jury to satisfy. Murderers? There're hundreds of 'em walking about alive now, all because they didn't come into detective stories.

All the same, I did know an amateur detective once. Clever he was, he worked it all out, just the way they do in detective stories. Helped me a lot. But there you are. We were both quite certain who the murderer was, and what could we do? Nothing. I put in everything I knew, all the old solid routine stuff, but I couldn't take the case any further. No proof. Only certainty. I'll tell you about it if you like.

Pelham Place it was called, and a fine place, too. Mr. Carter who lived there was a great one for birds. He had what they call a bird sanctuary in the middle of the park. It was in a wood, and there was a lake in the middle of the wood, fed by a little river, and all sorts of water birds came there, ousels and kingfishers and so on, and he used to study them and photograph them for a book he was writing about them. I don't know whether it would have been a good book, because he never wrote it. He was killed one day in June, hit on the head with what we call a blunt instrument, and left there. Of course he had a lot of notes and photographs for the book, but it never got finished.

He hadn't made a will, and everything was divided equally between the four nephews, Ambrose and Michael Carter, and John and Peter Whyman. Ambrose, that was the eldest, the one who lived there, wanted to hand the place over to the National Trust, which he said was what his uncle always meant to do, but the others wouldn't agree, so it was sold and they divided up the money. When war came, the army took it over, and of course that was the end of any sort of bird sanctuary.

Ambrose—that's my amateur detective—looked after the place and helped his uncle with the birds and the book. He said that watching birds wasn't so much different from watching people, and it was the best way of training your powers of observation which he knew, and there was a lot of detective work in it, too, and I daresay he was right. It was natural that he should feel more keenly about the place, and want to carry out his uncle's wishes, and equally natural that the other three shouldn't. John and Peter were brothers. John was an actor, mostly out of work, and Peter had just got engaged, he was a barrister but hadn't had any briefs yet, so they both wanted all the money they could get. Michael Carter was Ambrose's cousin, he was in business and doing pretty well, but he had an expensive wife, and money was money. So there it was.

The first I heard of it was from Ambrose, who rang up and said that Mr. Henry Carter of Pelham Place had been murdered, and could I send somebody up at once. I couldn't get hold of our doctor, he was on a case somewhere, so I left a message for him, took a sergeant with me and drove off. I don't know why, but I had expected to find the body in the house, sort of taken it for granted, and I was a bit surprised when Mr. Ambrose Carter—I'd come across him once or twice, of course—who was waiting for me at the front door, said, "Round to the left here and take the first fork on

the right," to the driver, and got into the car. And then he said, "Sorry, inspector, hope you don't mind my giving orders, it's in Sanctuary Wood. We can get a bit nearer to it this way." Seemed to have his wits about him, which is what I like.

Well, this is what had happened. Mr. Carter had gone out to his sanctuary at about ten in the morning the day before. He generally spent the whole day there and came back in time for dinner, but every now and then he'd stay the night, so as to be ready for them at the first light, so when he didn't turn up the night before nobody missed him.

"Where did he sleep?" I asked.

"There's a hut there. You'll see."

"Food?"

"Yes, and a spirit lamp and all that. It's quite comfortable. I've spent a night there more than once."

"So nobody thought anything of it when he wasn't there at dinner?"

"Well, there was comment, naturally, but we were just a family party, and most of us knew what Uncle Henry was like."

"Then when did you get anxious—or didn't you?"

"He would have been back in the morning for a bath and what little breakfast he had, he always was. John, my cousin, and I went to look for him. We thought perhaps he'd been taken ill. John's there now, not that there was the slightest chance of anybody interfering with—with the body. Nobody ever goes there. It's complete sanctuary."

If that was right, then it was a family job. So I'd better give you an idea of the family as I meet them. Ambrose and John both had what I call actors' faces though they weren't a bit alike. John Whyman was tall and dark and handsome with the sort of Irving face, you know what I mean? About thirty and a bit cynical-looking. Ambrose Carter, a little older, had one of those round blank comedian's faces which can take on any expression, d'you know the sort? Medium height. Might be fat one day.

He stopped the car and we walked a short way across the park to a wood. The lake in the middle of the wood—well, it was a large pond, really, I suppose—was as lovely a thing as I've seen, and the trees—but we'll skip all that or I shall be all night talking. John Whyman was sitting on a log, smoking a cigarette, and he looked at his watch as we came up and said, "A whole bloody hour," and Ambrose said, "Sorry, John, couldn't have been quicker, this is Inspector Wills." He hadn't seen anybody or anything, of course,

and I sent him off in the car with Sergeant Hussey, and told Hussey to wait at the house for the doctor and bring him back. And I wrote out a message for him to send, because I could see that we would want more help. And then Ambrose and I looked at the body.

"Fond of him?" I said.

"Enough not to kill him, do you mean?" he said, looking at me rather comical.

"I didn't mean that, sir, at all," I said, and it's true, I didn't.

"Sorry, inspector. And the answer is that we got on very well together. I liked my job, but I can't say that I either liked or disliked him. He was a little—inhuman. More interested in birds than men, and had never had any great affection for anybody, I should say."

"I know the sort," I said.

Mr. Carter lay on his back. His head and his right wrist were broken, as if he'd put his arm up to defend himself from the first blow, and been killed by the next. It looked as if he'd been dead for some time.

"When was he last seen alive?" I asked.

"About half past nine yesterday morning," said Ambrose.

"Well, he wasn't alive more than two or three hours after that, I should say, but we'll know more when the doctor comes."

"Meanwhile, what about his watch, that ought to tell us something."

I bent down to look at his wrist. The watch had been badly smashed but I could see the time. Eleven o'clock. Murder at eleven, I said to myself. Good title for a detective story.

"Hallo, that's funny," said Ambrose. "I could have sworn—" He stopped suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"He wore his watch on his left wrist," he said, a little lamely. It sounded as if it wasn't what he'd been going to say.

"Where was it when you and Mr. Whyman first saw him?"

"Where it is now, I suppose," he said, staring.

"You didn't notice particularly?"

"I noticed that his wrist and his watch were smashed, without paying much attention to it. Subconsciously I assumed it was his left wrist, as that's where you keep a watch. That's why. I was surprised."

"You're certain that Mr. Carter did?"

"Absolutely. Look, you can see the strap mark on his left wrist."

It's true, you could. I should have come to it in time, but he was quicker. Bird watching.

He walked round the body, and looked down from behind it. Then he laughed softly to himself.

"What's the joke, sir?"

"Well, well, well," he was saying. I went over to him and looked too. The watch was the wrong way round.

"You see what happened, inspector? The murderer broke Uncle Henry's wrist before he managed to kill him. Then he changed the watch to the broken wrist, and broke it, too. So now you know that the murder took place at precisely eleven o'clock. Which you wouldn't have known otherwise."

"Looks like it," I said.

"Like tying another man's tie for him. More difficult than you think. You're looking at the watch the other way round. What's right for you is wrong for him."

"What it comes to," I said slowly, "is that he wanted us to put the murder at his own chosen time." I wasn't going to be hurried.

"Right."

"Which means that it *didn't* take place at eleven."

"Right. Which means—what, inspector?"

"Which means," I said, rather proud of seeing it, "that the murderer probably has an alibi for eleven."

"Probably?" he said, surprised like. "Certainly; or why alter the watch? Well, we know *something* about him."

"But that's all we do know. We don't know what time he hasn't got an alibi for. The time of the murder."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he said rather airily. You know what I mean—rather sure of himself.

The ground was dry and hard. No footprints or anything like that. I had a couple of men coming, and they could look for the weapon, but they wouldn't find it, because it was probably in the middle of the lake. As soon as the doctor came I wanted to get back to the house, and ask a few questions. Meanwhile I might as well listen to Mr. Ambrose, if he fancied himself as Sherlock Holmes, because he seemed to have ideas, and good ones, too. We sat down on a log together and smoked.

"Let's have it, sir," I said.

"Have what?"

"What you've got up your sleeve, about the time of the murder."

"Nothing up my sleeve, inspector, I assure you. Your guess is as good as mine."

"I haven't started guessing yet," I said. "You go first."

"D'you mean it? Good!" He beamed at me. "First of all, what

would you say the limits are, I mean from the condition of the body?"

"We shall have to wait for Dr. Hicks to tell us that. And he'll make 'em pretty wide. May be six hours or so."

"As much as that? Oh, well, let's see what we can do. Now the first thing—Oh!" He stopped suddenly, and looked uncomfortable.

"Yes, sir?" I said.

"I was forgetting. Of course, that's the first thing to be settled." He was talking to himself rather than to me, and I waited a little, and then said, "What is?"

"Where are you looking for your murderer, inspector?"

"Haven't begun to look yet, sir."

"Inside the house or outside?"

"I shall want to see everybody inside, of course. And I daresay a lot of people outside, too. Any reason yourself, sir, for thinking it was one or the other?"

"The best of all reasons for thinking it was outside."

"You mean the best of all reasons for hoping it was outside?"

He laughed and said, "I suppose I do," and then to himself, "I suppose that's all I mean, dammit."

"I should like you to be frank with me," I said. "A murderer's a murderer, even if he's a relation."

"That's true." He threw his cigarette-end away, and lit another. "I'll give you both sides," he said. "A tramp or a trespasser, an outsider of some kind, comes whistling through the wood, knocking at the undergrowth with the stick he carries, making a hell of a row, and disturbing all the birds. My uncle rushes out at him furiously—as he certainly would—and asks him what the devil he thinks he's doing. There's a fight, the tramp hits him in self-defense, loses his head, and hits him again. Easy."

"Except for the watch," I said.

"Exactly, inspector, you've got it. Except for the watch. In the first place, a tramp wouldn't think of it; in the second place, he'd have a long way to go for an alibi, and a tramp's alibi isn't much good anyway; and in the third place, he wouldn't dare to put the watch on, in case the body was found before the false time was reached, or put it back in case Uncle Henry had been seen alive afterwards."

"Doesn't that apply to any murderer who fakes the time?" I asked.

"Yes. Except in special circumstances."

"And those are—?"

"That you know that the murdered man is going to remain in a certain place for a certain time, and, dead or alive, will be visited by nobody."

"Which was true in this case, and which everybody in the house knew?"

"Yes," he said, rather reluctantly.

"And, I suppose, the outside men, gardeners and gamekeepers and so on—they would know, too?"

"That's true," he said, brightening up. "Oh, well, then, just a bit of theorizing, here you are. If you murdered a man at three, and were altering his watch to two or four, which would you choose?"

"Which would you, sir?" I asked.

"Two o'clock, obviously."

"I don't see the obviously."

"Well, if I make it two o'clock, it's because I've already got an alibi for two. But if I make it four, it's because I hope to get an alibi for four; and I can't be absolutely certain that I shall. Something might go wrong. I might be with somebody then, but his memory might be bad, or he mightn't have a watch, or he might be a notorious liar. The other way I have made certain of a perfect alibi first, and I put *back* the watch to a time when I can prove I was elsewhere. Even if it is an unplanned murder, there's such a time somewhere."

"Well, that was true enough. Perhaps I should have thought of it, perhaps I shouldn't, I don't know."

"All right then," he went on. "The murder took place *after* eleven. How long after? If it were very soon after he couldn't have an alibi for eleven which was watertight. He's got to allow a margin for watches being wrong, and another for his distance from the place of the alibi—in this case, the house, presumably; a good twenty minutes away, if he walked, for he would hardly dare to leave a car about. I think that one's feeling would be for a good safe margin of an hour. You've got your alibi for eleven and a bit after, you kill at twelve, and you put the watch back to eleven."

"Then why not kill at one or two or three? Still safer by your reckoning."

"Lunch," he said. Just like that.

"Does a murderer let his lunch interfere with his plans?" I laughed, sort of sarcastically.

"Not *his* lunch, the dead man's. You can tell, can't you, when a dead man had his last meal?"

"That's right, sir, stupid of me."

"Uncle Henry would have his at any time between twelve thirty and one thirty, and what's the good of pretending he died at eleven, if he'd just finished his lunch? No, inspector, the absolute limits for the time of death are eleven thirty to twelve thirty, and the nearer to twelve the better."

Well, that was clever, it really was, and I couldn't see anything against it.

"All right, sir," I said. "He was killed at twelve. That means that the murderer has no alibi at all for twelve and a watertight one for eleven."

"As you say, inspector."

"In that case, sir, I will ask you where *you* were at eleven and twelve."

He gave a great shout of laughter.

"I knew you would," he said, twinkling at me. "I felt it coming."

"Nothing meant, sir, of course, but we have to know these things. Same with everybody at the house."

"Of course. Well, let's think. Times a bit vague; general plan—I walked over to Weston to lunch with some friends. Name given on demand. I left the house a bit after ten, and went over to the garage; talked to a chauffeur and a gardener or two till ten thirty, and got there, I suppose, at twelve thirty. It's four miles, isn't it, through the fields, but it was a hot day, and why hurry?"

"Why not take the car, sir? I suppose there was a car available?"

"Mrs. Michael wanted to go into town to do some shopping. Besides," he patted his stomach and looked at mine, "walking's good for the figure."

"Meet anybody?"

"Not to remember or identify."

"Did the others know you were going?" I asked.

"We discussed plans a bit at breakfast. Michael was—oh, but you'll prefer to ask them yourself. Sorry."

I thought that I might as well know what they had planned to do, even if they didn't do it, or pretended they hadn't. So I told him to go on.

"Michael always brings down masses of papers with him, he's the sort of man who works in the train. I told him he could have his room, and I'd send him in a drink later, and he told his wife that he'd be busy all morning. Peter and his girl—well, you know what the plans of a newly engaged couple are, inspector. As long as they are together, they don't mind where they are. I wanted to fix John up for golf, he's always very keen, but an agent or a

manager or somebody was ringing him up at eleven, and that would have made it rather late. So he said that, as soon as his call had come through, and he'd done his business, he'd take an iron out in the park and knock round a bit. I don't know if he did, or when he did, or, in fact, what any of them did, but that's what was said at breakfast."

He got up suddenly, as if he had an idea, and I asked him what it was, because I'd had a sudden idea, too.

"His notes," he said. "What idiots we are!"

"I was just going to ask you," I said, and I was, because I thought if he was watching a couple of birds nesting or something he'd make a note of the times when things happened, or anyhow make a note of the time of the photographs he'd taken. That hidey-hole! You wouldn't have known it wasn't a great beech trunk with bushes all round, and inside a regular home away from home. And there was his diary, and the last entry was ten twenty-seven! "What d'you know about that?" I said to Mr. Ambrose.

"It's funny," he said, picking up the diary and turning the pages backwards and forwards. "After all our clever theorizing, too. He would hardly go an hour and a half without an entry or a photograph. Hallo!"

"What?"

"Last entry comes at the bottom of the page. Coincidence?"

"You mean a page might have been torn out? A page going on to twelve o'clock?"

"Yes."

"If so, the corresponding page would be loose."

We looked. There was no loose page, but the corresponding page way back in March was missing. We knew, because an entry broke off in the middle and never went on. Well, it all fitted in, and Mr. Ambrose looked rather pleased with himself again.

Well, that was my amateur detective, and very good, too, I thought; and now I'll tell you what the professionals got. Mr. Carter's last meal was breakfast, and, putting his lunch time at twelve thirty, he was killed somewhere between nine forty-five and twelve thirty. So our guess at twelve was probably right. But when I came to alibis—and remember, the murderer had to have one for eleven, but not for twelve—things began to go a bit wrong. There was a woodman called Rogers who had no alibi at all, and the other employed men gave each other alibis for the whole morning. Mr. Michael Carter was shut up in Mr. Ambrose's study all the time, or so he said. He was a solid, bossy sort of man,

looked older than Ambrose, though he wasn't.

"Nobody came in that you can remember?"

"A maid brought me a whisky and soda some time in the course of the morning. I hadn't ordered it, but I drank it."

"When would that be, sir?"

"She might know; I don't." Much too busy a man to notice such trifles, he seemed to be saying.

Doris, the maid, confirmed this, but was uncertain of the time. "It was his elevenses as you might say, sir, only Hilda sitting down on a queen wasp and naturally having to go upstairs to put something on and me helping her and then taking it in myself, well it all made it late like."

Mr. Peter and Miss Mayfield, that was his girl, gave each other complete alibis, as did the chauffeur and Mrs. Michael. Of course you'll say that Mr. Peter's real alibi, for twelve o'clock, being only confirmed by a girl in love with him, wasn't very satisfactory. But how I looked at it, if the girl was going to give him an alibi anyhow, all that business of changing the hands of the watch to eleven and then smashing it was pointless. Any time was alibi-time for him.

Mr. John Whyman was the one I was most disappointed in. His call had come through at ten thirty—not eleven, as he had expected and I had hoped; it was over by ten thirty-five; and he took an iron and half a dozen golf balls, and went off into the park. All of which was confirmed by the post office and Mrs. Michael.

So there we were, and after all our checking up, the possibilities came down to these:

1. Michael Carter, assuming his drink had come in at eleven ten, as he would have known; which gave him an alibi for eleven o'clock in the wood; and no alibi for twelve.

2. Rogers; but only if John Whyman had altered the watch when left alone with the body, and had torn out the page of the diary. Why should he do this? Because he was afraid he might be suspected of the murder, being the hardest-up of the nephews, and having discussed with Ambrose the possibility of getting help from his uncle.

3. Any tramp, with John Whyman assisting again. But this was very unlikely, as the wood was in the middle of a private park, a long way from the road.

In the last two cases why didn't John make the time ten thirty, when he had an alibi, instead of eleven when he hadn't?

No reason. So you can take out two and three, and that leaves Michael Carter.

And then I'm blessed if that wretched little Doris didn't come and say that what with one thing and another, and talking it over with Hilda like, and not noticing the time Hilda making such a fuss and all, it was twelve o'clock before she took in the whisky. So Mr. Michael Carter was out, too—and nobody did it.

I had a good think about it that night. I lay in my big chair, and put a pipe on and a drink handy, and another chair for my feet. Because the super was wanting to take a hand, and I thought I should like to tell him who'd done it before he got all the credit for himself, or called in Scotland Yard.

The first thing I thought about was the watch.

Now it couldn't be clearer than it was that the murderer had done some funny business with that watch so as to fool us about the time. Look at what we had. The mark on the left wrist showing where it was usually worn; the fact that it was upside down, showing that it was put on the other wrist by somebody else; and the page torn from the diary, showing that the real time of death was being hidden from us. What could be clearer than that? "Nothing," I said to myself . . . and then found myself saying "Nothing" again in a wondering sort of voice, and going on, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The murderer *couldn't* have made it clearer!"

Silly of me, wasn't it, not to have seen it before. Why should the murderer want to make it so clear to us that eleven o'clock was the wrong time, unless it was because eleven o'clock was the right time? You see, if he had broken the watch in the ordinary way on the left wrist, whatever time he'd put the hands at, he couldn't be sure we'd accept it. Because everybody knows that the hands of a watch or clock can be altered to suit a murderer's plan. So he did a double bluff. He made us think that he had to get the watch on the right wrist because the wrist was already broken, and he let us think that he hadn't noticed the clues he was leaving behind. In fact, the murder took place at eleven, and this was the murderer's clever way of making us think that it didn't.

Mr. Michael Whyman, then, could have done it. He had no alibi for eleven. Everybody was out of the house by ten thirty-five, and he was alone until twelve when Doris brought in the drink. I took my feet down, and told myself that I had solved the case . . . and then I put my feet up again and told myself that I hadn't. Because Ambrose and John could have done it equally well. Neither of them had an alibi for eleven. So I had a drink and lit a fresh pipe, and went on thinking.

Motive and opportunity made it pretty certain that one of the

four nephews did it. If the one who did it was trying to make us think that the murderer had an alibi for eleven, wouldn't he make sure that one at least of the other three had such an alibi? Only so could he feel safe. Well, what about it? Did Michael know where Ambrose was at eleven? No. Ambrose might have been anywhere. So might John. Did John know where the others were? No. He didn't know where Ambrose was, and even if he knew that Michael was in Ambrose's office, he wouldn't know if Michael could prove it. Did Ambrose—and at that I shot out of my chair, banged my fist into my palm, and shouted "Ambrose!"

He had ordered a drink to be sent to Michael at eleven. That was to be Michael's alibi! John, he knew, had a telephone call coming in at eleven; that would be John's. It wasn't his fault that both alibis failed him. Ambrose! The amateur detective who had led me on, who had pointed out the mark on the left wrist, and the upside-down watch, and the missing page of the diary; who was taking no risks with a stupid country policeman, but handing it all to him on a plate. Ambrose, who had asked all of them their plans at breakfast and known where everybody would be. Ambrose, who had so casually let me know that two of his cousins had an alibi for eleven. Ambrose, who had proved so convincingly that the murder took place at twelve, when neither cousin would have an alibi! Ambrose!

Well, there you are, sir. If he hadn't been so clever, if he hadn't done so much amateur detecting in the wood, I shouldn't have tumbled to it. Helped me a lot, he did. There didn't seem any way of getting legal proof, and we never did prove it. But, as I said at the beginning, we both knew who'd done it.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Istvan Banyai

Sheriff Dennis Spurling comes from the "wrong side of the tracks," literally. His curly red hair and freckles mark him as close relative to a slew of Spurlings, most of whom he personally financed in a move out of the slummy little town he grew up in. It isn't clear how he got elected to the post of sheriff in Union County, Missouri, nor how he actually met Pete Arlesley, his by-the-book deputy from California, but it is clear that, regardless of his background, Dennis Spurling is an excellent sheriff. And now he is facing the particularly nasty murder of an insurance salesman in St. Michael, Missouri. Phillip Dempsey is a mama's boy who is killed with a hatchet at a Halloween haunted house entertainment put on by the city fathers, and it would seem that each of the city fathers (or mothers) has a strong motive to see Dempsey dead. In J. E. Neighbors' **Hatchet Job** (Pageant Books, \$3.50, 256 pp), we watch Dennis frustrate Pete every inch of the way by refusing, or neglecting, to use proper police procedures, even though he does allow Pete to follow his own academy-trained methods. Finally, it is Dennis (and his unusual knowledge of the residents of his county) who uncovers the various motives and, eventually, the killer. J. E. Neighbors' sense of the rural Missouri setting and his characterization of the townspeople from both strata of society make this book a pleasant read.

Lilian Jackson Braun has brought back Jim Qwilleran, ex-reporter, heir to the Klingenschoen fortune in Pickax City, Michigan, and human to the Siamese duo, Ko Ko and Yum Yum. As is usual in Braun's witty and light-hearted mysteries, Ko Ko is the one who has all the clues and Qwill must decipher them to solve the puzzle. This time it is the mysterious and brutal murder of Harley and Belle Fitch in their beautiful mansion on the edge of town. Jewelry is missing and robbery appears to be the motive, but in that case, why was Belle killed first, upstairs, and Harley second, at the front door? Qwill is suspicious of this circumstance, and when Ko Ko starts sniffing glue and knocking maritime pictures and books about, he tries to find out what really happened. And is Yum Yum breaking sandbox training for the same mysterious reason, or does she have something else to tell Qwill—like get rid of your latest girlfriend? In **The Cat Who Sniffed Glue** (G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$14.95, 208 pp), Braun brings us up to date on the fate of the Klingenschoen mansion after the fire and the auspicious beginnings of the *Moose County Something*, the newspaper started up in *The Cat Who Knew Shakespeare*. She sets the narrative in the style of scenes and acts in a play, paralleling Qwill's involvement in the Theater Club, and we meet more of the fascinating residents of the towns of Sawdust City, Chipmunk, Squunk Corners, Middle and West Middle Hummuck, Wildcat, Smith's Folly, Mooseville, and Brr, all in Moose County, "400 miles north of everywhere."

Ann Cleaves takes us to Kinness, an island that appears to be in the North Sea off the Scottish coast, in **Murder in Paradise** (Fawcett, \$3.50, 213 pp). We follow George Palmer-Jones, retired from the Home Office where he was instrumental in formulating techniques for the interrogation of criminal suspects, and now an avid bird-watcher. He and his wife Molly have been accustomed to spending an autumn holiday with Jonathan Drysdale and his wife Sylvia. Jonathan is the teacher on the island, and he and his wife are both outsiders in this clannish place, but he tolerates the situation, since he is banding, and writing a paper on, the various seabirds and waterfowl that inhabit the place. This year George has come alone, at the same time that Jim Stennet returns to the island with a new bride, English-born Sarah, a nurse who finds the prospect of island life romantic. Sarah and George come together after Jim's deaf little sister falls to her death on the night of their arrival; after a bit, another island resident is killed at short range with a shotgun. Both suspect murder, even though the mainland police feel that "unrelated accidents" is a better conclusion. Ten-

sions between the Stennet and the Dance families, both long-term residents on the island, provide a sinister undertone to the proceedings. The atmosphere is enhanced by descriptions of late night forays to band whooping swans, foggy walks across the island paths, and clandestine meetings in abandoned crofts. The reader can almost taste the salt in the fog, feel the nip in the air, and realize the stress of being an immigrant to an island where others have lived for generations, preserving the old ways and resisting change.

Philip Lee Williams, native Georgian and author of two critically acclaimed non-mystery novels (*A Distant Forest* and *All the Western Stars*), has started a mystery series starring Hank Prince, ex-minor league baseball player, alcoholic, and failure in the private investigator business. But Prince has that little something in him that characterizes all the hardboiled private eyes since Hammett—if your partner is killed, you find out who and why, even if you didn't like your partner. Well, Tony Browning wasn't Prince's partner, but he was an old friend, and Prince was once the lover of Tony's wife Sherrill. Even though Prince doesn't approve of Tony's drug-dealing ways, when he disappears he decides to investigate. **Slow Dance in Autumn** (Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., \$15.95, 255 pp) treats us to a fine characterization as Prince crawls back up out of an "Evan Williams Black Label Sour Mash Bourbon Whiskey" fog and circulates through the classy and sleazy parts of Atlanta, DeKalb County, Georgia. Falling in love with Ginny, a heroine who reads Faulkner, is the catalyst that allows him to reenter life, but searching among the drug dealers and mobsters for hints of Tony helps also. A fine cast of supporting characters, including Mrs. Gunnerson, the incomprehensible landlady, and the group of boarders who live with Prince in her boarding house; Tenhoor, the cop; and Shuler, the aging mob kingpin, contribute to a tightly written private eye novel in which the hero learns as much about himself as he does about the case. A fine start to what I hope will be a long series.

Carey Roberts has provided us with a Washington, D.C., homicide detective, Anne Fitzhugh, in a mystery about the art world which is just riddled with red herrings. Anne is attractive, with independent means; she entered the police force from a successful law career after her husband, up-and-coming Congressman Rob Fitzhugh, is shot while trying to break up a parking lot brawl. Her motivation is unusual—she feels that, since there is little prospect of his shooting's ever being solved, she can only deal with her grief

by delving into the motivations for other homicides. And it seems to be working by the end of **Touch a Cold Door** (Pageant, \$3.50, 306 pp). When we meet Anne, she is new to homicide and, although her captain has faith in her abilities, her partner, Lieutenant Dakota, ex-Redskin football player, is less confident. Anne goes by intuition—not exactly police procedure. She draws her fellow detectives in homicide into a reinvestigation of the drug overdose of Theo DeLise, a gallery owner and British diplomat, only on the say-so of an old schoolmate, artist Nina Bibesco. Through her investigation we are brought into the Georgetown art scene and meet five artists who knew and depended on Theo. Did he die of an accidental overdose or was it suicide? When his ex-lover, an aide to an Ohio congressman, questions the department's conclusions and subsequently dies, Theo DeLise's death suddenly looks a lot like murder. Motivations, for the arts and for a possible double homicide, are set in the political scene of our capital to provide an insightful portrait of each suspect. An interesting, not-quite-procedural, police novel.

(continued from page 4)

BEST MOVIE OF 1987:

***The Big Easy*, directed by
Jim McBride, written
by Daniel Petrie, Jr.**

Black Widow, directed by Bob
Rafelson, written by
Ronald Bass

Fatal Attraction, directed by
Adrian Lyne, written by
James Deardon

No Way Out, directed by
Roger Donaldson, written
by Robert Garland

Robocop, directed by Paul
Verhoeven, written by
Edward Neumeir and
Michael Miner

Stakeout, directed by John

Badham, written by Jim
Kouf

BEST TELEVISION SERIES OF
1987:

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WGBH/Boston for PBS**

The Equalizer, presented by
James MacAdams for
CBS

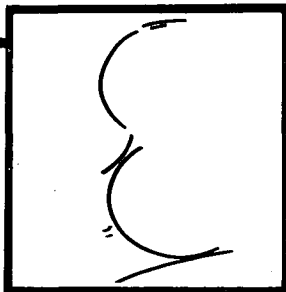
Murder, She Wrote, presented
by Richard Levinson,
William Link, and Peter
Fisher for CBS

Private Eye, presented by
Anthony Yerkovich for
NBC

Wiseguy, presented by
Stephen J. Cannell for
CBS

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Atequila sunrise is a mixture of grenadine, orange juice, and tequila. Writer and direction Robert Towne's latest film, **Tequila Sunrise**, is a volatile mix of friendship, crime, and love.

Dale "Mac" McKussic (Mel Gibson) and Nick Frescia (Kurt Russell) are best buddies from high school days, when they shared everything. McKussic became a drug dealer, Frescia a cop. McKussic now insists that he's quit the drug business, however. Frescia, who has been promoted to head of narcotics for Los Angeles County, warns his friend about dealing, but he knows what he's got to do if Mac is still in fact part of the drug scene.

Jo Ann Vallenari (Michelle Pfeiffer) is a beautiful restaurant owner whose posh eatery is frequented by McKussic. The Federal Drug Enforcement

Agency believes that Miss Vallenari may be involved with McKussic in more ways than serving him dinner. Nick, of course, wants to believe his friend is out of the drug business, but the Feds aren't so sure and are on Nick's case to do something. Police surveillance of the restaurant is the result.

In the course of his investigation, Nick also becomes friendly with Jo Ann, but we cannot be sure if the cop is, as Miss Vallenari puts it, "into romance for purely business reasons."

Mac lives in one of those unassuming but expensive little beachside communities of Southern California. He's got a speedboat, a Porsche, an ex-wife, a son whom he loves, and "an accounting problem to clear up with the Colombians." He simply wants to get the police off his back, get his ex to tone

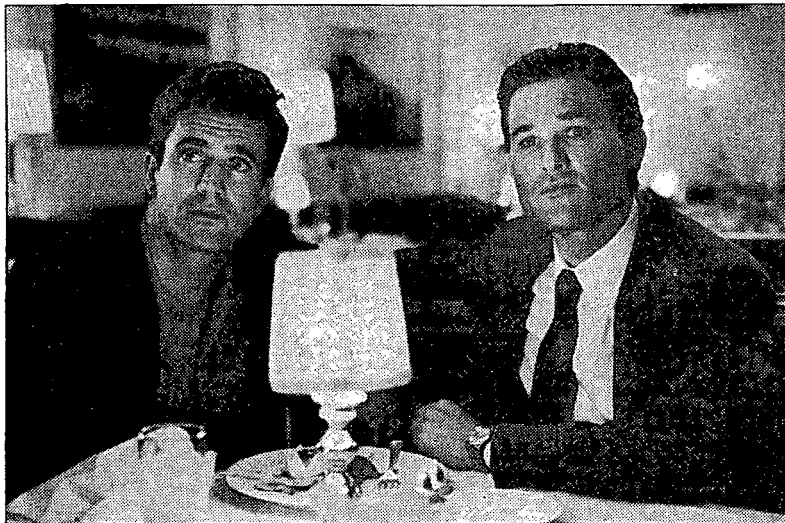
down her demands for money, get custody of his son Cody, get Jo Ann Vallenari to go out with him or sleep with him or marry him, and clear up that "accounting problem."

Nick would like to get the DEA off his back, see his friend make an honest living, and go out with, sleep with, or marry Jo Ann.

If nothing else, this film has the handsomest of casts. Director Towne knows it and uses closeup shots as often as he can—but a bit too often, which slows down the pace of the film. The dialogue at times is stilted, with lines like this from Nick: "I don't stop being a detective just because there's no crime," or, "You're kind of like a play

and everything's on cue." Such talk brings the film to the level of a thriller-spoof. Towne, who won an Academy Award for his *Chinatown* screenplay, should be able to do better.

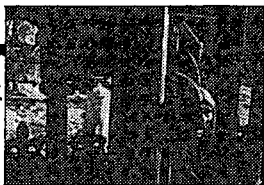
Tequila Sunrise has an explosive ending. Jo Ann makes her choice between Mac and Nick. Mac makes his choices about friendship, crime, and love. Nick makes his choices about friendship and the law. But although the second half of the film is quick-paced and contains some surprises, the setting up of the later part is sometimes laborious. And the picturesque Southern California setting was underused, as most of *Tequila Sunrise* takes place at night or indoors.



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Mel Gibson, left, as drug dealer Mac McKussic and Kurt Russell as cop Nick Frescia in *Tequila Sunrise*.

THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious won by A. B. Herring of Honorable mentions go to Pennsylvania; Carolyn Hilgina; Bob Wynn of Young's

Shirlseven of Chicago, Illinois; B. Jarvis of Ashland, Oregon; Julia Happe of Tampa, Florida; Theresa Duff of Redmond, Oregon; Morgan S. Thompson of Spring Valley, California; Jeff Huber of Santa Rosa, California; Cheryl A. Browne of Port Chester, New York; Marjorie Hodges of Shreveport, Louisiana; Kathleen McConnell of Torrance, California; and James E. Witherspoon of New York, New York.

Photograph contest was Westminster, Connecticut.

Jan Streilein of Johnstown, ton of Pennington Gap, Virginia, Ontario, Canada;

THE RAJAH'S TONGUE by A. B. Herring

As burglar alarms blared their alert inside the mansion, Brooks the chauffeur paused breathlessly at the gate to the old family cemetery and stared at the dazzling ruby in the palm of his hand. It was his at last! The prized Rajah's Tongue!

His gaze traveled to the ornamental Indian's head on the rusty gate. Perfect. The mouth was open just enough to slip the Rajah's Tongue inside. He glanced quickly around him—he was quite alone except for the gardener's spotted cat who arched affectionately around his legs. Swiftly, he secreted the gem and returned to his quarters over the garage.

Later, Brooks crept back to the cemetery. Placing a finger in the Indian's mouth, he froze! The Rajah's Tongue was gone!

Suddenly, a voice behind him spoke. "So you return, monsieur!"

He turned to see Monsieur Chirac, the famous French detective, kneeling, calmly studying the activities of the gardener's cat.

"You were observed hiding the valuable ruby you stole, monsieur. For you, the game is up."

The cat sauntered away down the fence line. Chirac rose to follow its progress.

"The gardener informs us the little pussycat is an accomplished thief himself," Chirac said, lighting a cigarette, a flicker of amusement on his long, thin face. "But, alas, he is even better at caching his loot."

The chauffeur gaped. "You mean—" he faltered, unbelieving—"my jewel—the Rajah's Tongue—"

"*Mais oui, Monsieur Brooks,*" Chirac answered sardonically. "As you Americans say—the cat has got your Tongue!"

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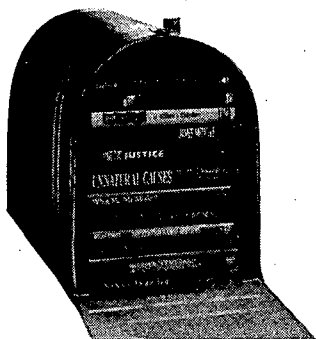
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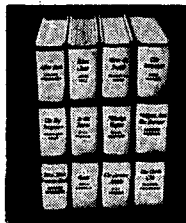
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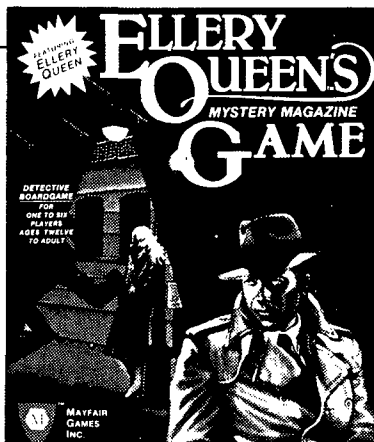
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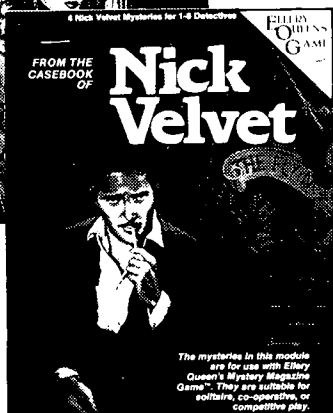
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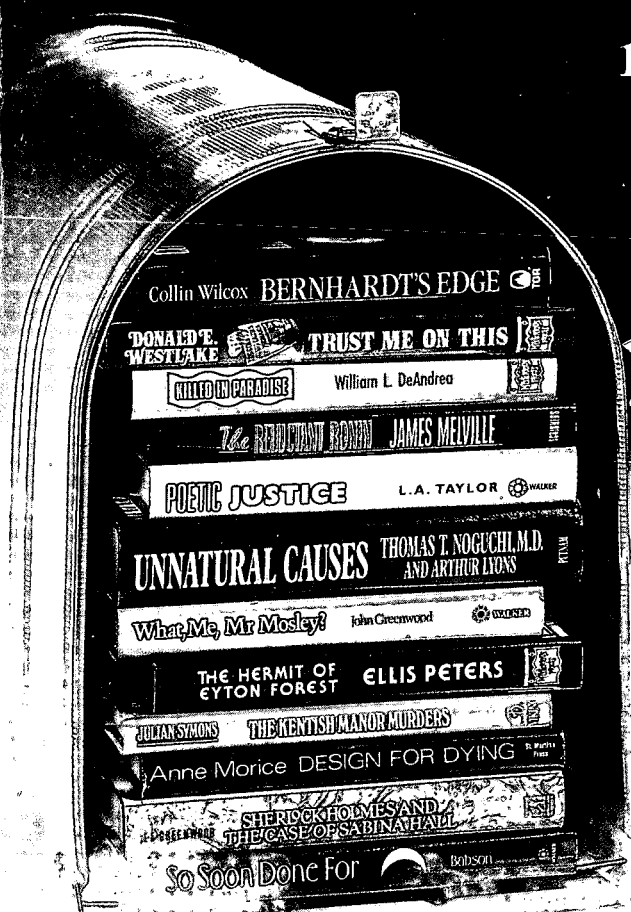
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